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THE CAPTAIN OF THE RIFLES; or, THE QUEEN OF THE LAKES.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.



FACING SQUARE TO HIM, WITH SABER UPRaised, I CRIED OUT: "SURRENDER, OR I CUT YOU DOWN!"

The Captain of the Rifles;

OR,

THE QUEEN OF THE LAKES.

A Romance of the Mexican Valley.

BY CAPT. MAYNE REID.

CHAPTER I.

AN ODD ENCOUNTER.

"LADRONES! Socorro! Socorro!"

The cry reached my ears as I was sauntering home to my quarters in the city of Mexico. Though the words were Spanish, I knew it to be "Robbers! Help!"—a shout far from uncommon in the Mexican capital.

To a soldier such appeal should not be in vain; and drawing sword, I ran in the direction of the voice. It seemed to issue from a side-street—narrow, and pitch dark; for it was a late hour of the night, and only the dimmest of oil lamps flickered at distances far apart. Turning into the street, I paused to listen, expecting to hear the cry repeated. Instead, silence profound. The robbers had garroted their victim, or murdered him outright!

No! The hush was but momentary, quickly succeeded by some angry words; then the hurried trampling of feet, with a clash of steel as in the play of sword-blades.

Guided by these sounds I ran on, soon to reach the nearest of the lamps, by the light of which I made out the figures of two men leaping about, and lunging at one another with bared blades. They were to all appearance, engaged in a deadly combat, and so earnestly as to preclude speech, or even shouting. By their dress they were Mexicans, one wielding a rapier, the other a common *machete*; and that they had not long before thrust one another through was because both had been shielding their bodies with something wrapped around the left arm—one a cloth cloak, the other a *serape*.

Just as I got up, he with the *machete* made a slip on the stones, and the rapier was about being pushed between his ribs, when, with a down cut of my cavalry saber, I broke the slender blade in twain.

The man thus saved from what looked like certain death, and further safe by his adversary being practically disarmed, would, I supposed, keep his ground, and proceed to explain things. Instead, soon as feeling himself fairly balanced on his feet, he gave a grunt of relief, and darted off into the darkness, leaving me to settle scores with the other; whom, from his getting the better of the fight, I took to be the assailant.

Facing square to him, with saber upraised, I cried out:

"Surrender, or I cut you down!"

"To you, *Señor Capitan*, I surrender with the greatest good will; all the more readily, that you've left me but a lame weapon with which to further defend myself. Let me tell you, however, that you're laboring under a mistake, and in this little affair have taken the wrong side. For which I shall expect you to make good my gold watch, that scoundrel has carried off with him. But for you I should have recovered it, besides sending the fellow to a place where he wouldn't have the chance of picking any more pockets."

"You were not the aggressor, then? It was you who cried 'Socorro'?"

"Of course it was. I shouted at first, when I felt a hand tugging at my guard-chain; in the darkness I thought there might be half a score footpads around me. Seeing only one, I could ill brook being despoiled by a *pelado*, so I drew to protect my property. Unfortunately he had got possession of the watch before we came to blows, and, thanks to your interference—well meant, no doubt—he has it now. So, *Señor Capitan*, as an officer and a gentleman, I trust to your seeing the time-piece restored, or what to me will be the same, recouping its cost. It's one of Losada's best, and stood me twenty *doblores*."

If my surprise was already great, it was not lessened by listening to this extraordinary speech. The ludicrous side of it first struck me, and I was disposed to treat the whole thing as a jest, at the same time inclined to resent it as an impertinence. But during our brief dialogue we had sauntered into the main street, where there was a better light from the lamps, and by this making closer scrutiny of the man, I saw it would be no jesting matter should I refuse compliance with his demand. I had by chance seen him before, and knew he was an officer of the Mexican army; one of those we had taken prisoner during our brief campaign in the Valley, previous to the capitulation of the city itself. I may here mention, that the army to which I belonged was that of the United States—invaders, conquerors, and now quartered in the enemy's capital. Many of these, our prisoners on parole, were also residing there; associating with us, their captors, in a semi-friendly way—some

altogether friendly, others maintaining a haughty, suspicious reserve. They met us at the *monté* tables, sat side by side in the theaters, and hobnobbed with us in the drinking saloons, which under Yankee patronage had sprung up, mushroom-like, all over the city. It further chanced that I knew this particular individual both by name and title—Captain Rafael Moreno, a soldier of good standing, with the repute of being ready to call out his man if occasion required. So that if I did not get restitution of his watch, or make good the value thereof, I might look for a challenge from him; which, prisoner though he was, I would not dare to decline.

I may truthfully say, it was no thought or fear of this which influenced me in assenting to his conditions. For I did assent to them, after a moment's reflection, soon as discovering that his tale was true, and I was dealing with a gentleman. My reason for doing so was twofold. First, the justice of his demand. Clearly had I hindered him from recovering the contents of his filched fob—twenty doubloons' worth; and as clearly was I in honor bound to see the amount made good. My second reason was of a quite different nature. In addition to knowing the name of this Captain Moreno, with his character as a soldier, I was further aware of his being one of those Mexicans friendly to us, by their fellow-countrymen contemptuously termed "Ayankieados." There were many such among the upper class—the *familias principales*—who, wearied out with constantly recurring revolutions and the rule of the sword, would have been glad to accept citizenship under the banner of the Stars and Stripes. Considering all this, without further hesitation I consented to his terms, saying:

"Well, *señor*, twenty doubloons is a large sum of money—rather unpleasant having to part with for a mistake; especially one meant as an act of humanity. But you say the watch cost you that, and taking your word, I agree either to get it restored, or pay you the amount specified."

I might as well have omitted the former clause, and paid him the cash down, or taken him to my quarters and there handed it over; for as to finding the pickpocket, that was all moonshine. In the city of Mexico, at this particular time, thieves were as thick as blackberries.

"Just what I would have expected of you!" was the Mexican's rejoinder. "For although I haven't the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with *El Capitan Maynard*, as you see, I know his name, and something besides, which I needn't speak of now. If I mistake not, we've met at the *Fonda de Espiritu Santo*, several times."

"We have; I remember you well."

"*Muy bien, Capitan*. And now I have another proposal to make, which if you accept with like good-will, we shall meet there again, and in a more friendly manner."

"So preface, I could not do otherwise than accept—even without knowing what it is."

"It is this, then: if you don't find the footpad and recover my *reloja*—two things as unlikely as any probabilities may be—I shall still insist on your paying the forfeit. But not in cash, unless you prefer it that way. I would far rather have it disbursed in payment for a supper; to be eaten by six gentlemen; half of them your friends, half mine."

"Agreed!" I cried, instantly closing with his conditions, the liberality of which was in keeping with the character I had heard of the man.

"*Bueno!* That's settled; to me in a more satisfactory way than before. And now, *señor*, may I beg an exchange of cards?"

We exchanged them; and after some further words, mutually warm, sealing our new-formed friendship, we bade "*Buenas noches!*" he turning toward the city, I continuing on to my quarters—a sort of suburban outpost, by the *Paseo de las Vigas*.

CHAPTER II.

THE VISION OF THE PASEO DE LAS VIGAS.

WHILE sojourning in the Mexican capital, I was a frequent promenader on the *Paseo* called "*Las Vigas*," which lies on the eastern side of the city. It is a public drive, ride, or walk, as you may wish it; and though by far the pleasantest, not the most fashionable—this being the "*Paseo Nuevo*" sometimes named *De Bucarelli*, from the Italian employed in laying it out. It is on the opposite, or western side; for in the Mexican metropolis, as in London, the west end is that favored by fashion, while the east is more the dwelling-place of the people. But, as in London, there are also "slums" and dangerous dens in the very center of the city.

At a certain season of the year, that of *Cuaremas*, or Lent, the *Paseo Nuevo* is forsaken; the *élite* of society transferring its patronage to *Las Vigas*. Then the latter is crowded with handsome equipages, gallants on horseback, and well-dressed promenaders afoot. Only for a few days does this intrusion of grandeeism continue, the brilliant throng disap-

pearing as suddenly as it showed itself, leaving *Las Vigas* not quite deserted, but in occupation of those to whom it more exclusively belongs—the denizens of the east-end, shopkeepers and proletarians.

In this, its normal condition, I liked *Las Vigas* the better; for then and there one saw the Mexican people *chez eux menus*, their native customs and manners unaltered by foreign influence; their national costumes free from any mixture of the *outré mer*.

Alongside this interesting drive runs the canal, *Santa Anita*, which unites the navigation of Lake Tezcoco with that of Xochimilco; thence passing on into the Laguna de Chalco. It is, in fact, the main water-way by which the produce of the south-eastern portion of the Valley is conveyed to the capital. Not a canal, in the European sense of the word, since it has neither tow-path, nor the ordinary kind of canal boats to be towed. Instead, the craft that navigate *Santa Anita* are, for the most part, flat punts of the bread-basket pattern, propelled by poles, with scarce a stick of difference between them and those which came crowding round, and obstructed the brigantine of Cortez. And not much more difference in their crews; the same bronze-colored, black-haired men; for all, or nearly all, who dwell around Lakes Chalco and Xochimilco are Indians of the Aztec race—their blood unmixed as when Moctezuma and Guatimozin reigned over them. It is they who chiefly manage the traffic of the lakes, carrying their commodities to the markets of the capital.

And such commodities! Think of Ceres, with her riches; Flora, with her charms; Pomona, with her treasures—you can see all there. One boat will be laden with golden heads of maize, from the Chalco plain, or it may be *chile*, *frijoles*, and *garbanzas*; another carries the produce of a tropical clime—the *tierra caliente*—fruits of countless kinds and colors, brought on mule-back, and as often on man's back, across the southern sierras, many a long league before being launched upon the lakes; a third transports a freight the product of the *tierra templada*—the Valley itself—kitchen vegetables, fruits and flowers, some of them grown in gardens which float upon the surface of the water!

Something besides is seen in these boats, on which the eye may fondly rest—female beauty, oft of the rarest kind. For many of the dark-skinned daughters of Anahuac are fair withal, possessing such charms as those of the beautiful maid, Malinché, who made captive the heart of Cortez.

Standing by the side of *Santa Anita*, gazing down upon the boats, as they pass to the market of San Domingo, at these berry-brown damsels, with roses entwined in their crow-black tresses, and other roses on their cheeks; with lips red as the blossoms of the grenadine—oft parted in smiles, displaying snow-white and regularly-set teeth between; listening to their merry laughter, or it may be a song; perchance seeing them dance, to the tinkle of guitar or *jarana*—one who has been witness to all this will not wonder at my preference for the *Paseo de las Vigas*.

Luckily for me the place was near, almost contiguous to my quarters; an old dilapidated barrack, the quondam *cuartel* of a Mexican cavalry regiment, in which for four mortal months I was condemned to dwell. The detachment I had charge of, a company of U. S. Mounted Rifles, had been assigned to it, and there, *nolens volens*, we must abide.

A residence at first not at all to my liking; and I must confess that for a time I scarce did honest duty by my command. Far pleasanter was it to idle around the Plaza Grande, or the "Street of the Silversmiths;" and this pleasure I too much indulged in, during hours nocturnal as diurnal. But only for the first fortnight or so; after which came a change in my predilections, thus brought about:

One morning, after dismissing my men from parade, I was sauntering down the *Paseo*, now and then casting a glance at the canal, along which the country boats were passing to the city. As usual, in many of them were women and young girls, having charge of the vegetables, fruit and flowers; some even handling the oars or paddles. In the market they would preside over the sale of their commodities, as do some pretty Jewesses in Covent Garden.

Most of their faces I had repeatedly seen before, and gave them but a cursory glance. One, however, that was new to me, called for something more—nay, demanded it. It was that of a girl, not long entered on her teens, but as much a woman as would be one of our cold Northland passing out of them. Her bust, rather *décolletée*, through thin *camisa*, that so scantily covered it, showed the rounding of maturity; while above rose a neck smooth as a quail's, supporting a head of shape symmetrically classic, to which both face and features were in correspondence. Her long black hair, plaited and coiled cable-like over her crown, was encircled by a wreath of white flowers, the blossoms of the *cacalo-sutschil* (*blumeria*), the favorite flower of the Aztec Indians.

I had looked upon queen wearing her jeweled crown, and duchess under her gemmed coronet, but never saw I queen or duchess who could compare, either in dignity or grace, with that

simple daughter of a Southern land, her head enfiled with the flowers of her clime. She seemed, in truth, a very vision, a thing ethereal; or, if earthly, something upon which Nature had expended its choicest handiwork.

It was some seconds before I could take my eyes off her; but the boat was gliding onward, and I cast a quick glance over it to see how she was accompanied. That glance gave me no very satisfactory feeling. A fine-looking young fellow was rowing the craft—a sort of skiff—he, like herself, being an Indian, and as she, of distinguished mien. Was he a brother, or might he be her husband? Though but a beardless youth, in Mexico I had seen husbands young as he, and wives younger than she—hundreds of them! Whatever the relation to her, he was to be envied.

"Who is she?" I asked of a showily-dressed man who stood beside me, his eyes, as my own, seemingly riveted on the girl.

"Chingara! what's that to you?" was the response in Mexican Billingsgate—he who made it drawing his purple *manga* up over his chin, and striding sulkily away.

I thought of following and calling him to account for his rudeness; but it just occurred to me that the question I had asked was one I should not care to make public, as it might be by my grounding a quarrel upon it. It was not unanswered, however; another bystander, who had heard it put, volunteering the response:

"Una chinampera, Sñor Capitan," said he, raising the hat from his head, and courteously saluting.

"Thanks!" I rejoined, returning the bow of this more obliging individual, whose somewhat threadbare habiliments were in singular contrast with his graceful bearing. "I'm indebted to you for politeness, but as yet not much information, since I haven't the most distant idea of what a chinampera is. Perhaps you will enlighten me!"

"Con mucho gusto, sñor; though I thought everybody knew that. But, as you say you don't, I take pleasure in informing you that a chinampero—or chinampera, if it be a woman—is one who cultivates a chinampa, otherwise called a floating garden."

"Ah! now I comprehend. And does she do that?"

"No; not the cultivating part. That is her father's affair, assisted by the brother—the *muchocho* you saw rowing the boat."

Her brother, then! I breathed freely. "Her business," continued my informant, "is to sell the flowers in the Mercada de San Domingo where they're just taking a cargo now. Ah! she'll soon get rid of them. No end of purchasers at her stall—young *ricos*, ready to pay any price she may ask. *Carrai!* I'd like myself to be making money, as fast and easily as *La chinampera bella*."

"Oh! she is called the beautiful chinampera, is she?"

"Usually so, by us in the city here. At home, and among her own people, she's better known *La Reina de los Lagos*."

"The Queen of the Lakes! A very pretty and poetical appellation. But why so styled, pray?"

"Well, sñor, that isn't so much of a mistake as one might suppose. There's many a queen upon the throne, who hasn't any better pretensions than she. For she is of royal blood, from some ancient Aztec prince or king; at least, so I've heard said. However, it isn't altogether for that they call her queen, but as much on account of her grand ways and great beauty. She is very beautiful, you'll admit that, Capitan?"

"Why, yes; fairly good-looking," I rejoined, with an assumed air of indifference, for I did not want him to be aware of the interest with which she had inspired me. Then, continuing, in the same careless way: "Where might her Lake Majesty live?"

"With her father, of course, on their chinampa. That's in Lake Chalco."

"The father has a name, I suppose; some Aztec cognomen?"

"Oh! yes; he has that, I believe, among his own people, of whom he's a sort of head man or cacique. But, as you may be aware, our Indians are Christianized, and good Catholics as any of us. Of course he's been baptized like the rest. In the city here we call him Don Tito, the Alcalde, as he holds that office in his floating village."

"There's a whole village of these chinampas then?"

"Por cierto, sñor; more than one *pueblita* of them in different places around the several lakes. That of which the Señor Tito is chief magistrate is one of the largest, a row of *huertas* nearly a mile long."

"Indeed! it must be a very curious collection."

"It is all you say. Perhaps your excellency would like to pay a visit to it? If so—"

"Oh! no, no," I said, cutting the proposal short. There was something in his manner I did not exactly like, and I had got all the information I then wanted. To give him his *congé* I added: "Let me once more thank you for your civility, in pleasant contrast with what I received from that surly fellow in the fine clothes."

"Ah! caballero; the coat don't always make the man, as your excellency has no doubt proved by experience. Though I am but a poor devil, I trust I know how to behave myself in a becoming manner."

As his dress betokened, he belonged to the class indifferently styled *leperos* or *pelados*—the lazzaroni of Mexico—beggars or thieves as it may be, but with powers of conversation and a grace of deportment many a gentleman might be proud of.

"As for him," he added, referring to the man in the purple *manga*, "his rudeness to you, Sñor Capitan, can be easily accounted for."

"In what way?"

"The old story. He's *enamorado*."

"You know him, then?"

"Not much; but that I know. He's in love with *La bella* to the very tips of his fingers, and can't bear any one even to look at her."

"Indeed, can't he? Well, my good man, I'm indebted to you for the information you've given me. Permit me to thank you with this."

I held out a bit of silver, expecting to see his eyes sparkle, and his fingers eagerly stretched forth to clutch it. But I saw neither one nor the other. Instead, once more raising his battered *sombrero*, and giving it a graceful sweep round his head, he rejoined:

"Muchos gracias, caballero! But your money I cannot take; gratitude forbids."

"Gratitude! For what?"

"For a service your excellency did me."

"A service I did you! You must be mistaken, my good fellow. So far as my recollection goes, I never set eyes on you before."

"You have, Sñor Capitan; and, as I say, done me a service, worth at the very lowest estimate a good three hundred *pesos*. Ah! in a certain sense worth far more."

"When, and where?"

"No matter about the when and the where. Be content to know that your humble servant is grateful."

"Certainly you seem so, but—"

"But," he interrupted, catching up the conjunction, "if you're not satisfied with words, give me an opportunity to prove it by deeds."

"In what way would you?"

"Well, Sñor Capitan, in a way I fancy will be agreeable to you."

Saying which he came close up, with a significant leer on his swarthy features, and added, in undertone: "Of course, caballero, I'm aware how much you admire *La bella*. Any one with half an eye could see that, as you stood gazing down at her in the boat. Now, though I'm only a poor devil, with a ragged wrap over my shoulders, I know a thing or two. Besides, I have the honor of a personal acquaintance with the Queen of the Lakes; and if your excellency feels disposed for a little bit of flirtation—*una cosita de amor*—I'm your man to bring it about."

"Scoundrel!" I exclaimed, indignantly repelling his proposal, at the same time turning my back upon him and walking away.

Before I had gone far, some instinct, curiosity or otherwise, prompted me to take another look at him. Glancing over my shoulders, I saw he was still in the same place, standing as if transfixed, the expression upon his features more of astonishment than anger. Possibly, during all his experience as an *alcahuite*—for I took that to be his calling—he had never met with such a rebuff.

CHAPTER III.

UNDER THE EYES OF THE QUEEN.

FROM that day the Calle de Plateros had less attractions for me, and the Paseo de las Vigas more. Every morning at a certain hour, I would find myself sauntering along the canal's edge, looking out for a flower-laden boat, for that flower fairest of all—their Queen.

Nor did I look in vain. She came; though, as I soon learnt, not daily, but only twice a week; learning also to time my strolls to her periodical advent. The brother was always with her, he being *patron* and sole oarsman of the skiff. A handsome youth, as already said, with a cast of features quite different from those I had observed among the common people of his race. By inquiry I had ascertained, that, so far, the *pelado's* story was true. They were of noble, even princely origin; could claim descent from one of the Aztec princes who figured in the court of Moctezuma, and fell with Guatimozin. There are many such in Mexico. Not so great, then, the inaccuracy in her being styled Queen. Had Cortez never come there, she would in all likelihood have been at least a princess.

I saw her again, on several occasions—each time only the more to admire her—till, at length, she almost wholly engrossed my thoughts, or made me think of little else than how to engage hers in return.

A difficult task it turned out, and for long seeming hopeless. I cannot recall the number of times I stopped that flower-boat, purchased bouquets, the costliest it carried, only to fling them into the nearest ditch, as soon as she was

out of sight. All to no purpose; the Queen of the Lakes was not to be thus wooed, or won. I was but throwing away my time, as well as the dearly-bought flowers.

I had at length grown despairing of success, when an accident occurred which gave strength to my hopes, hitherto feeble. In the army whose uniform I wore it was a rigorous rule to hold morning and evening parade, even upon outpost duty, and however small the detachment. It was done for the sake of discipline and keeping up an *esprit du corps*; and of course I had to conform to the regulation. The ground where I was in the habit of holding mine was at the upper end of the Paseo, a wide open space in every way suitable for the purpose. One day I had just dismissed my men from this ornamental exercise—evening parade it was—and was wheeling my horse round to ride off, when two faces caught my glance showing above the bank of the canal—soon as catching, need I say fixing it? For one of them belonged to *La bella*. The second was her brother's, and I could see that they were both standing up in their boat; could tell, moreover, that they had been so for some time, by the skiff lying motionless on the water. Evidently they had been watching our parade, wondering at it, since this expression still pervaded their features. They may have witnessed cavalry evolutions before, but not with such large horses, and in their eyes giant-like men. A troop of Mexican dragoons, on their diminutive mustangs, by the side of mine would have appeared very pigmies.

Seeing it was all over, the young Indian dropped down upon the midship thwart of his boat, and was making to pull off. But the girl still kept upon her feet, her eyes bent on me, as I fancied, with an expression of some interest. It was the first time I had been so favored; and, possibly, I thought of a reason. If woman, savage or civilized, can be at all won, the suitor whose chances are best is he who may appear in the guise of the warrior god, and under a panoply of armor. That, after a fashion, I represented this in the eyes of that Indian girl, would be sham modesty in me not to admit believing. Hitherto she had known me but as one of her many customers, officers as civilians, who purchased her flowers, perchance paying her pretty compliments along with their money. Now she saw me at the head of my troop, half a hundred splendid fellows in brilliant uniform, whose minds obeyed mine as they moved to the words of command. Was it this had gained me those glances of interest, or, as I would fain have believed it, admiration? Whether or no, I felt as one who had achieved a triumph.

Spurring my horse close up to the canal's edge, and raising my cap, I saluted her. There were no flowers in the skiff now; it was returning from the market, as a matter of course empty; so I felt rather at a loss for some subject to open conversation with. Possibly had the brother not been there, I might more easily have found one. Besides, he seemed impatient to be gone, which also aided in disconcerting me. Ungrateful young rascal, after the many bouquets I had bought, and the score of *pesos* paid him! However, I at length bethought me of a theme which I hoped would detain him. Addressing myself to the sister, who was the older of the two, I said:

"Señorita, I envy you your home upon the waters. I'm told you live upon a sort of floating island; a garden growing only flowers. It must be a very Eden!"

"Oh, señor!" she rejoined, seeming scarce to comprehend my florid and figurative speeches, "we live upon a *chinampa*."

"Just so. And that's the very thing I wish to make acquaintance with. These gardens alongside the canal here are not real chinampas, 'tis said. Certainly they are not afloat."

I referred to some patches of parallelogram form, with water-ditches between, on which kitchen vegetables are grown. They lie alongside the canal, a short distance beyond the lower end of the Paseo; little lions of the Mexican capital, shown to strangers as the "*chinampas*."

"They're not," emphatically pronounced the girl's brother, now for the first time appearing to become interested in what was being said. "Chinampas!" he added, with a scornful toss of the head; "*por Dios*, no! They're nothing of the sort."

His professional *amour propre* was evidently touched.

"I thought they could not be," was my rejoinder, spoken with a suavity still further to conciliate him. "And that's just why I'm so desirous to inspect a genuine chinampa."

"Pues, caballero," responded the youth, who, as most Indians of the valley, could speak Spanish, even its idioms; "to do that you must go a good way. There are none nearer than Xochimilco, and they're not much. The finest chinampas, believe me, are our own; and they're in the Laguna de Chalco, a little way beyond. *Ay Dios*, Lorita! that reminds me we must be moving, or night will be down before we can get through the *acaloté torta*. Buenos tardes, señor."

Saying which he pulled hastily off—his sister having seated herself on the stern thwart—and soon they were beyond speaking distance.

I felt some little disappointed by this abrupt departure. I was half-expecting an invitation to visit the water village, of which Don Tito was alcalde. But my disappointment was less hard to bear, as, following the boat with my eyes, I saw the girl looking back over her shoulder, once, twice, and a third time, when the leafy branches of a Peruvian pepper-tree, drooping over the canal, provokingly screened her from my sight.

"At length—at last—I have reached her heart!"

This to myself, as I sat in my saddle, thrilled with triumphant happiness.

CHAPTER IV.

SERVING A SCOUNDREL RIGHT.

My exultation was short lived; succeeded by a feeling very different. What was I doing? Making endeavor—my very best—to steal the affections of an innocent maiden, unsuspecting of any evil intent. And what my purpose? Was it honorable?

Up to that moment I had never thought of asking myself these questions. Despairing of success, they had hitherto no pertinence. But now, with kindled hope, they came before me, like drops of gall poured into a cup of sweetness. Had the girl been a flirt, or coquette, I might have sought justification in that, and possibly found it. But she seemed the very opposite; and was, from all I could hear—innocence typified, simplicity itself. True, there were the innuendoes of the would-be go-between, oft recalled, but as often rejected with incredulity. To such as he, the purity of Lucretia herself would seem but prudery and pretense.

If my reflections caused me pain, they also did something to chasten me; and as I turned my horse's head toward quarters, I had half made up my mind nevermore to look for the flower skiff that carried the Queen of the Lakes; and if possible, tramp out the interest with which she had inspired me.

A woman's voice raised in cries of terror, or distress! The voices of men, too—one of them exclaiming in anger! I heard all this, just as I had reached the upper end of the Paseo; the cries coming from the opposite, beyond where I had last seen the departing skiff. Since then, scarce sixty seconds had elapsed, and in less than as many more, I had wheeled to the right-about, galloped down the drive to its extremest end, where again the boat came under my eyes. But now it was not alone. Another was by its side, or rather a little behind; in which last there were three men. Both boats were moving through the water, fast as their rowers could propel them. At a glance I saw that they in the skiff were being chased; with the same *coup d'œil* taking in the class and character of the pursuers—their costumes enabling me to do so. They were dressed in the ordinary garb of *rancheros*, a little motley and eccentric, but its chief eccentricity was in a broad list of scarlet cloth, half-covering the crowns of their sombreros. This was distinctive, telling them to belong to the "Red Hats,"—a band of robbers at the time acting with our army in the capacity of scouts.

The whole thing was clear; at least so thought I at the moment. The three, out for a row on the canal, had come across the flower skiff, and having drank too much *aguardiente* were going in for a lark with the Indian girl.

It was evident that the young Indian, on seeing them so intent, had turned his skiff on the canal, and was pulling back for the Paseo to escape them. As I caught sight of the two boats they were approaching the central point of a wide sheet of water—a sort of pond, through which the canal here passes—the girl still continuing to call out in alarm; the boy shouting, too, but more in angry remonstrance. Neither her cries of terror, nor his words of indignation had any effect on the trio of Red Hats, who, the instant after, shot their boat up alongside the skiff, and grappled on. Then, one of them standing up, leant forward to lay hold of the girl. He would have succeeded had she sat still. But she did not; instead, suddenly rising to her feet, she sprung over into the water! The boy, letting go his oars, leaped after her; both in a panic, as I supposed.

For two or three seconds they were under; during which, short as the time was, I felt anxiety indescribable—believing them in danger of being drowned.

No, not they! I was soon relieved by seeing them once more rise to the surface, and, side by side, like a pair of otters, come swimming on toward the bank. If necessary, they could have dived to it!

But they were not yet rid of the Red Hats. He who had attempted to lay hands on the girl, having leaped into the lighter skiff, and taken up the abandoned oars, was rowing after, still seeming determined to effect his purpose.

He succeeded, so far as to overtake her; but not till she had climbed out on the bank, where she stood panting and dripping; he, with a brutal

oath upon his lips, having bounded upon it beside her.

Again eluding him, she made an effort to continue her flight afoot, but the wet skirts clinging around her limbs impeded her, and at the third or fourth step she tottered, and fell to the earth. She had no need to flee further. As she rose to her feet again she saw that her safety was secured. For by this I had got upon the ground, and taking a firm gripe on the collar of Red Hat's coat, had the ruffian at my mercy.

At first I thought of detaining him, till I could call up some of the guard, and send him to our guard-house prison. But still believing it only an affair of drunken deviltry, it occurred to me that I might as well bestow the chastisement at once, and in a way more appropriate to the offense—I would *duck* him! The spirit of frolic had got into me, too, and I could not resist it. I was still in the saddle, my horse close to the canal's edge, and the Red Hat against the right stirrup, firmly retained.

"My good fellow," I said, laughingly, "you've been drinking too much spirits, clear; you'll be the better of a little water to mix them."

At which I lifted him from his legs, and with an outward jerk shot him over into the canal. It was all done in a minute's time, and in another I saw him swelter out on the opposite side. There, after shaking himself, and giving me a glance of direst malignity, he joined his two coadjutors, who had already landed from the boat—all three disappearing behind some bushes near by.

Not till then was I aware of the mistake made in letting him off so easily. In the hurry and excitement I had never thought of looking in the fellow's face; but when I now saw that face across the canal, with the demon-like scowl upon it, a fancy flashed into my brain that I had seen it before. Not fancy, either, but a clear and distinct recollection. For he was the same man who so rudely responded to my inquiry about the chinampas; differently and less elegantly attired it is true, but certainly the same. I now regretted having let him go with such cheap castigation; for recalling what the *pelado* had said about him in connection with the girl, and what I had myself seen, it now occurred to me that he intended something more serious than the snatching of a kiss. It was too late, however, to repair my mistake. But I knew where the Red Hats were quartered, and could look him up there, which I registered a resolve to do.

While still standing with eyes fixed on the retreating ruffians, I felt my hand taken hold of, by fingers soft as if gloved with silk; then something yet softer and warmer pressing against it. The lips of the girl; she was kissing it!

"*Gracias, salvador mio!*" she exclaimed. "*Mil, mil gracias!* I can never enough thank you. No, never!"

"Don't speak of thanks," I said, in response to them both; for by this the brother was also volubly pouring forth his gratitude. "I'm only sorry I let the scoundrel escape. If I had known who it was—"

"Oh, señor!" rejoined the young Indian, interrupting, "he's a bad, bad man—*un ladrón*, as all those are with the red bands on their sombreros. But I needn't tell you that. We didn't know he was one of them, because we've seen him dressed quite differently. And it isn't the first time he has insulted my sister. He's done it on several occasions, at the market and in the streets. Oh, señor! I'm so glad you tossed him into the canal. He deserved that, and a good deal more."

"More he shall get, in due time; you may rely on it. But, how came it about? You met them along the canal yonder?"

"We did, señor. They came out from the side in their big boat, and then made straight toward us. I knew his face soon as I saw it, though he is in other clothes; and suspecting they were after no good, I turned the skiff and rowed back. Ah, caballero! how fortunate for us you were here. *Santissima!* we sha'n't come any more to the city until—until—"

"Oh, don't let that hinder you; you need have no fear of him, hereafter. I shall take care to have him put in a place where he won't trouble you again. And now, señorita," I said, addressing myself to the girl, who, with the wet *enagua* close clinging to her finely-developed figure, recalled the statue of the Dripping Nereid, "you're in danger of catching cold. If you'll come to my quarters, possibly I can find something dry to wrap around you."

I was answered by a stare of astonishment from both, the brother laughing as he rejoined:

"She has no need of that, señor. Lorita don't care for a wetting, any more than myself. We live on the lakes, as you know, and are in the water almost as often as out of it. Catch a cold, indeed! No, no; not from a dip like that."

"Well, let me call one of my men, and send him round for your boat?"

The skiff had drifted down the canal, and was now lying against the opposite bank, at some distance off.

Again the young Indian gave out a laugh, the sister smiling in concert.

"What, caballero!" he exclaimed, in a tone

of surprise. "Send a man all the way round for the boat! No need of that, as you shall see. Come, Lorita! *Nos vamos!*"

Saying which, he plunged back into the canal, she after him; but not till having once more taken hold of my hand and kissed it. Then, with another expression of gratitude, and an *Adios!* spoken in tone which seemed to say, "I should be sorry to think it the last," she took the leap without fear!

With wondering eyes I watched them as they swam on toward the cliff. Very amphibious they appeared—she with her long black tresses, now escaped from their coil, trailing on the surface behind—an image of Undine, or some siren of the sea!

Soon both were in the boat, which, once more moving to the oar-stroke, shot across the sheet of open water. As it again glided out of sight, entering the narrower canal, and the girl looked back as before—but now with gaze fixed and continuous—all my fine resolutions seemed to melt as snow under the summer's sun; and I rode back to quarters resigned to continuing the acquaintance, but with no intention of trifling with her.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROBBERS PARADE.

As already said, the "Red Hats" were a band of brigands, who had been taken into our service to act as scouts, and sometimes employed on escort duty, on the principle of setting the thief to catch the thief. It was a fancy of our commander-in-chief, General Scott, who had a *penchant* for such buffoonery. Nothing good came of it, but much evil, in addition to its being a disgrace to us on the score of humanity, quite as much as the employment of blood-hounds—or red-skinned savages. For these Red Hats were robbers *pur sang*—"salteadores a caballo," or highwaymen. There was a complete *partida* of them, well mounted, armed with lance, saber, carbine, and pistols, and variously appareled—the only uniformity in this respect being the strip of scarlet cloth on their hats. This distinctive badge was not of their own adoption, nor for ornament, but worn by orders, and for their safety, lest our soldiers, mistaking them for the enemy's *guerrilleros*, whom they closely resembled, might shoot them down at sight. Unmitigated ruffians they were, every one of them; abandoned by God and their country—which last they had themselves abandoned, betraying it in a double sense. Their chief, a certain Dominguez, usually called "Colonel" (for, in truth, he had been such in the Mexican army), was a remarkable man. Of medium size, rather stout in build, but active withal; full-featured and swarthy, the *beau idéal* of Mazzaroni, or the "devil's brother." As usual, he had a tale of wrong to account for his having taken to the road; and I can testify to his having some redeeming qualities—indomitable courage certainly.

As I had a slight acquaintance with the bandit leader, my duty having more than once brought me in contact with him, I placed reliance upon this to facilitate my purpose—which was to search among his followers for the one who had offended, have him arrested, tried, and punished for the outrage.

It was still not too late that day to set about it, and the sooner the better. I might be in time to catch the culprit before he could change his dress; and with the wet suit on, as it were, in *flagrante delicto*. So, taking one of my sergeants along, I rode over to where the Red Hats were quartered, in one of the suburbs on the north side of the city.

Dominguez received me with due courtesy, and as much grace as Duval might have shown to a duchess while stripping her of her ear-rings. In answer to my requisition, he said:

"*Con mucho gusto*, Capitan. 'Twill give me the greatest pleasure to parade my beauties before you; though I fear you won't find him you're looking for among them."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because the description you've given of him don't seem to correspond with any one in my *partida*."

"But he was dressed exactly as they, with the red band around his hat; as also the two who were with him."

"That's likely enough, but counts for nothing. As you are aware, Capitan, under the *agis* of your army, my Red Hats just now enjoy some little privileges, not extended to others of the profession. For which reason there are counterfeits of them abroad, who by gross misbehavior do much to give my *honest* fellows a bad name."

At this little *jeu d'esprit* the bandit gave a loud guffaw, nor could I help laughing myself.

"However," he continued, "we shall see whether he of whom you complain be a real Red Hat, or only a spurious imitation. *Hola!* there, Raymundo! Sound the *asamblea!*"

The bugler brayed out the "Assembly," and, quick as I could have brought my own men to muster, the *salteadores* were on the ground of their parade; where, at a word of command from their chief, they formed in line of single file. There were about sixty of them; and, perhaps, three-score sets of features more forbid-

ding man never saw ranged side by side. They presented every phase and type of the ruffian; from the cowed, craven thief, with eyes cast down or averted, to the bold, unblushing robber who looked you straight in the face.

"Now, caballero," said their chief, after I had finished my inspection of them, "can you make out your man?"

"No," I answered; "he's not among them. Is this the whole of your band, colonel?"

"Every sinner of them, with the exception of the sick, and some wounded—in your service, Señor Capitan. Perhaps you'd like to take a turn through our hospital; though I can assure you the individual you describe isn't among my invalids either."

"It's not necessary," I rejoined. "I will take your word for it, colonel."

By this I had become certain—less through the bandit's assurance than from some other circumstances—that neither he, whom I had soused in the canal, nor his two confederates belonged to the fraternity of Red Hats; and I left their cuartel with but a poor prospect of ever again setting eyes on the scoundrel I was in quest of.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FORFEIT SUPPER AND ITS REVELATION.

If I was not likely ever more to meet the masquerader in the Red Hat, still less chance was there of my encountering the footpad who had carried off Captain Moreno's watch. Of seeing him again I had long since given up hopes—indeed, never had any. For even if brought face to face with him in the broad daylight, it was doubtful whether I could have identified him.

In the Mexican capital, at that particular time, there were no detectives to ferret out and recover stolen property. For the regular native police had been for certain reasons displaced, our soldiers doing their duty; and to have set these in search for a thief would have been like putting a pampered house-dog on the trail of a fox.

I had never thought of doing so; instead, had admonished the Mexican officer of my design to satisfy his other condition—in fact sent him the invitation to supper. As it so chanced the appointment was for that same night, and after leaving the barrack of the Red Hats, I rode direct to the place where we were to sup, the Fonda de Espiritu Santo.

As agreed upon, there were to be six; and on reaching the hotel I found the other five awaiting me—their involuntary host. Not unwilling, however; for by this I had become better acquainted with Captain Moreno, and would have been only too pleased at extending such hospitality to him, without thought of its being a penalty paid for having made a mistake. And, after all, he as much as myself was host on the occasion.

It was rather an oddly-composed supper party, three American officers—for the two I had invited were such—and three Mexican; Moreno's friends being also *militarios*, all of them our prisoners on parole! In all probability we had met on the battle-field but a few weeks before, and there did the best we could to kill one another. Now we were face to face at a supper-table, again doing our best, not to take one another's lives, but to make them mutually agreeable. While sitting down, we had thought of the change of circumstances, so ludicrous we all laughed at it.

And such a supper as that was! For I may here observe, that the Spanish *cocina* beats the boasted *Cuisine Francaise* "into fits," while the former is yet inferior to the *Cocina Mexicana*, by reason of many dishes of Aztec origin this last had added to its list, unknown to the cookery books of the Peninsula. For tongue-tickling, palate-gratifying combinations of spice, garlic and capsicum, the *chef* of a first-class Mexican restaurant stands unrivaled.

To such a repast we sat down; and for a time the conversation was on general topics, most of a serious nature. But when the wine began to make us merry, it changed to lighter themes; at length, as a matter of course, coming to women. Not much about the moral attributes of the fair sex, however; only their personal qualities and charms, those of different countries being compared. We, the strangers, were of course loud in praise of the señoritas of the country; while our Mexican friends, not to be outdone in courtesy, one and all declared they knew no ladies so bewitchingly beautiful as "Las Americanas," and added Moreno, who knew I was not an American, "Las Irlandesas."

In this connection, it was but natural that our thoughts should extend, with our speech also, to the real indigenous article of feminine beauty, as exemplified in the Indian.

"*Fear todas!*" (all ugly) emphatically pronounced one of the Mexican officers, Colonel Espinosa. "I've never seen a pure-blooded Indian girl yet, who could be honestly pronounced beautiful."

"Then you've never been through the San Domingo flower-market," interposed Moreno.

"Yes, have I; scores of times. What is there to see in it?"

"Oh! if you've seen nothing already, 'twould be of little use pointing her out to you."

"Pah! I suppose you mean *La chinampera bella*—otherwise the 'Queen of the Lakes?'"

"You are right, Espinosa; so far as to whom I allude; but wrong in the imputation you cast upon her by your word of derision—altogether wrong. The Queen of the Lakes is a girl of excellent reputation, which I have never heard called in question."

"Ah! you seem to be well acquainted with her," rejoined the other, with a laugh, and in a tone of innuendo.

"I am," said Moreno; "or, at all events, with her character. It so chanced that my uncle owns the land lying along the lake shore where her father has his chinampa. Indeed, they are in a sort of way, his tenants. So, as you see, gentlemen, I speak with some knowledge of the girl, and can assure you she's as pure as the snow on Popocatepec."

During the early part of this dialogue, into which the two had drifted, I felt not only pained, but indignant, with a desire to clutch the throat of the questioner. I succeeded in restraining my temper, however; and listening on, became calm again.

"What you say, Captain Moreno," remarked the third of the Mexican officers, a quiet, reserved sort of man, "is borne out by the girl's demeanor. I've purchased bouquets from her myself—who hasn't? And for one who sells flowers in a public market, receiving such flattery, too, her modesty is indeed remarkable. On a par with her beauty; and that, I think, Colonel Espinosa himself will scarce call in question."

"Quite a red-skinned Venus! Lucretia as well!" exclaimed the other.

"Venus, or not," retorted Miranda, "your description is not accurate, when you call her red-skinned. She's a pure-blooded Indian, I believe, or at least so it's said. But I could name some of our ladies called *blancos*, ay, some who boast of their *sangre azul*, with complexions not a shade lighter than hers. The only red perceptible about her is the coral of her lips and the carmine on her cheeks."

"*Bravo! bravissimo!*" cried the colonel, clapping his hands, as though applauding an actor on the stage. "By my word, Captain Moreno, you're eloquent on the charms of this aboriginal damsel. Were I to report your fine speeches in a certain quarter—say to one of those same dark-skinned señoritas of the *sangre azul*—you might be called to account for them, in a way you wouldn't like. Ha! ha! ha!"

The other officer joined in the laugh. It was evident Moreno had an *amanté*, about whom they both knew something.

"Oh! report and welcome, *amigo mio!*" returned the captain, speaking in calm confidence. "In love affairs, thank the Lord or my luck, I have a clear conscience, and nothing to fear. As for this Indian girl, I admit I've but slight acquaintance with her; for all, I believe her to be what I've been told—incorruptible, and worthy of her title of Queen."

"In that we differ diametrically," rejoined the colonel. "For I have bought of her many a thing for my button-hole, and been told nothing. But something I've seen, which contradicts all your exalted ideas of her."

"What?" asked every one in a breath, myself among the number; I more eager than any for the answer, though I trembled to hear it. "What have you seen, Colonel Espinosa?"

"Why, only the Queen of the Lakes—this modest, model girl of our friend Moreno's showing—in close, and apparently familiar, converse with one of the most accomplished sports in the city of Mexico."

"Who?" asked Moreno, in a tone proving him still incredulous of the aspersion cast upon the Indian girl.

"You may not know him," answered the colonel; "and it isn't likely you do, any of you. He's not often seen upon the streets by daylight, but may be by night, in a certain *casa*, up one of those shady streets behind the cathedral. There I've met him myself, unfortunately too often; since he's as clever at tossing dice as in deluding the *muchachitas*."

"Let us hear his name, anyhow!"

"I've heard him addressed by more than one. He has several, no doubt, to suit time and place. That he goes by in the gambling-house is simply Señor Hilario, with the Don to it, of course. For he affects the fine gentleman, dresses stylishly, so elegantly indeed, that among his associates he is known as 'El Guapo.' His usual wear is the costume *a la ranchero*, with a *toquilla* of pearls round his hat, and a cloak of finest broad-cloth upon his shoulders—a purple *manga*."

I started as if an adder were under my chair, involuntarily repeating the words, "Purple *manga*!"

"Ah! You know the gentleman, señor?" said the colonel, turning to me. "Well; I hope your experience of him has been pleasanter than mine, and you've not been the victim of either his packed cards or loaded dice."

"No, Colonel Espinosa," I answered, with an effort to conceal my emotion. "I have no acquaintance with the individual you speak of. Only your having mentioned a purple *manga* recalled my meeting with a man under somewhat strange circumstances."

I stopped here, not caring to be further communicative.

"Well," pursued the colonel, "if you ever meet him, you'll be face to face with one of the cleverest rogues in the city of Mexico; where I admit, Mexican myself, there are no lack of them. But I haven't yet said all I have to say about him. In addition to his other accomplishments, he has the reputation of now and then doing a stroke of business on the roads—in short, of being a *salteador*, the scene of his operations, as I have heard, lying among the mountain passes by the old pyramid of San Juan de Teotihuacan. Now, gentlemen! judge for yourselves, whether I've spoken too freely of *La chinampera bella*—Captain Moreno's model of innocence—after seeing her in the company of such a character."

"You have seen it? Where? When?"

It was Moreno himself who put the questions.

"Twice at her flower-stand in the San Domingo market; once in a street adjacent; and once again on the canal by the Paseo las Vigas, where she was in her boat going home. True, on the last the brother was with her; though she didn't seem to make much of his presence. Being his senior, she controls him. Certainly, she appeared to be quite on good terms with El Guapo."

"*Ay dios!*" muttered Moreno, with something of a sigh, evidently pained by these revelations. "I wouldn't have believed it. My uncle's people, who know a good deal about the girl, have a high opinion of her character. Still, they may be mistaken in that regard; nor would it be so strange. Beauty, such as hers, is sure of being assailed from all sides. Come, *amigos míos!* Suppose we drop the disagreeable subject, and drink to our host of the night! I toast him!"

"Our host of the night!" cried all, filling their glasses, and holding them up.

"Perhaps," added the proposer, "you expect me to back my toast with a speech. 'Well, then, twill be a short one. Only to say, I should be content to lose a Losada watch, once every year, if 'twould bring about such a friendship as the last I lost has done, with a night of pleasure like this. Now, Caballeros! *Salud al Capitan Maynard!*'"

CHAPTER VII.

MASQUERADING IN THE LITTLE OWL INN.

NOTWITHSTANDING the warmth with which my guests had toasted me, and the wine I had drank, I felt ill at ease during the rest of the evening. The revelations thus accidentally brought out were food for bitter reflection, and I was glad when the hour arrived for the supper-party to break up.

Bidding "buenas noches" all round, we sallied forth into the street. Outside the Fonda I parted with my two brother officers, whose quarters were in a different part of the city. I was about starting for my own abode, as my horse had been sent back with the sergeant, when I observed that Espinosa had walked off the same way, and like myself, alone.

A thought struck me, and hastening my steps I soon overtook him, saying:

"Señor Coronel! Pardon me for asking if you're on the way to your sleeping quarters?"

Despite his cynicism on the subject of woman, he was by no means of a morose nature, rather the reverse; and, as I knew, would not resent the liberty thus taken.

"Or," I continued, without waiting his reply, "might it be that you think of once more trying your luck at the *casa* you spoke of?"

The question took him a little aback—not strange it should—but being an old soldier, accustomed to surprises, he soon recovered himself, and laughingly answered:

"Well, caballero, in your second surmise you've made a straight shot. I am going to the place you speak of. But why do you ask? Is it that you wish to accompany me?"

"Just that—if you've no objection."

"On the contrary, 'twill give me the greatest pleasure to introduce you to *La Lechuzita*, one of the most infernal dens in our Mexican metropolis. Saying which I save you from boiling over with gratitude. But, by the way," he added, suddenly stopping and turning his eyes on me, "you're in uniform! *Santos Dios!* I didn't think of that."

"Does it make any difference?"

"*Caramba!* yes; all the difference in the world. Although the place in question, as I've already said, is rather queer, and you'd there see costumes of many kinds—some fantastic enough—that blue frock of yours, with the yellow facings and eagle buttons, would draw a crowd of characters around you, not over-disposed to politeness. For you must know, Señor Capitan, that the frequenters of the Little Owl are fearfully patriotic, and no Americanos are admitted—if known to be such."

"In that case I cannot go with you, I suppose?"

He reflected a second or two, then said:

"Have you any objection to a little bit of masquerading?"

"Not in the least. I submit myself to your guidance, and will do as you direct."

"Then I think I can manage it without much

difficulty. We travel past the place where your humble servant finds lodgment; and there, if I mistake not, I can make you fit to appear before the company we're to mix with."

By this we had reached the end of a little street, into which he turned, I of course along with him. After passing several houses we came to a stop at the door of one, which he opened with a latch-key. It being now after midnight everybody was abed, and the windows all in darkness. Striking a match and lighting a small lamp, he conducted me up a single flight of stairs, then into a room of size sufficiently large, but with a very low ceiling, which I knew to be the *entresuelo*—for in the houses of Mexican cities, as those of Paris, the second story is appropriated to apartments of an inferior class.

"As you see, caballero," he said, with a laugh, observing that I scrutinized the room, which was somewhat scantily furnished, "we Mexican officers don't dwell in palaces. And, just now, thanks to your kindness in having conquered us, we're rather worse lodged than usual, seeing that for some months past our pay has been stopped. So I can't offer you much in the way of either eatables or drinkables; but, possibly, a *copita* of Catalonian brandy would be to your liking? It will serve to fortify you for the little affair we have in hand. I can give you that, of best brand."

"Thanks, colonel! just what I should like."

While he was getting out the bottle and glasses, I completed my survey of the apartment, clearly his dining, drawing, and bedroom, all in one. A *catré*, or camp-bed, stood in one corner; in another lay a military saddle, with a lance leaning over it, for the colonel had commanded a regiment of "Lanzeros." Against the wall were suspended a saber, pistols, belts, and other accouterments, while the only table in the room showed a few articles of crockery-ware, with the *débris* of what must have been a rather frugal repast. Good-humoredly alluding to this, he poured out a glass of the *Catalan*, leaving me to drink it while he went rummaging in a large leathern portmanteau he had dragged from under the bedstead. Out of this he drew a *ranchero* rig—velveteen jacket, *calzoneras*, *calzoncillos*, waist-scarf, and all. These, with a broad-brimmed *sombrero*, which hung on a nail behind the door, completed the dress I was to wear in the gaming-house. As I had worn the like before, I needed no instructions about putting them on, and in a trice I stood arrayed in the picturesque national costume of Mexico.

"*Por Dios, Señor!*" he exclaimed, after inspecting me. "You look as much Mexican as myself! Lucky your skin and hair are darker than's common among your countrymen, most I've seen being *güeros* (blondes.) And as you speak our tongue like a native, I defy any one to detect the counterfeit. You Americans don't exactly gesticulate as we; therefore, let me drape your arms with this."

Saying which, he took a serapé from off the camp-bed, where it had been doing duty as a quilt, and drawing it upon my head, let it drop down over my shoulders.

"Now for La Lechuzita!"

A short walk soon brought us to the Calle de Obispo, which runs along the rear of the cathedral, and continuing up this we turned into a dark narrow street, in which was the *casa de coymé*.

The Little Owl pretended to be a *posada*, or inn; but there was no sign or other insignia to uphold the pretense. If there had been, we could not have seen them, as there was no light from windows—there being no windows—while the great entrance door was closed as that of a jail, which it resembled. Dark as it was, my conductor, easily found his way between the side-posts, and gave a knock. Not double or loud, but a single tap of the gentlest, to be heard only by ears which might be in listening. Such there were, for almost instantly I could distinguish the shuffling of feet inside the *saguan*; soon after a voice asking guardedly:

"*Quien es?*" (Who is it?)

"*Amigo de la patria.*" (A friend of the country,) was the response of my companion.

There was a short interval of silence, the party inside still seeming to hesitate about opening the door, when the colonel, becoming impatient, called out in a more commanding tone:

"*Presto, muchacho! Abre la puerta! Soy el Coronel Espinosa.*" (Quick, my lad! Open the door! I'm Colonel Espinosa.)

"*Bueno!*" grunted the voice; and with that the wicket in the center of the huge door turned on its hinges, and we stepped inside.

"Pardon me, Señor Coronel, for having delayed you," said the janitor as we passed him; "but as you know, one needs be cautious in these strange times."

"*Caramba!* that's quite true," rejoined the officer with a laugh, adding, "and at all times, *hombre*, when admitting any one under the wings of the Little Owl."

The man, comprehending the colonel's jest, echoed his laugh, and we went on inward. As yet neither lamp nor candle threw ray of light

around us; but my companion seemed to know every paving-stone in both passage and court, and I followed the sound of his footsteps. Crossing a corner of the *patio*, we stepped up to a rickety wooden corridor which ran round three sides of it; and following this for a few paces stood before a door, through the keyhole of which we at length saw light, at the same time hearing voices inside.

Before entering, my conductor, laying his lips close to my ear, said in a whisper:

"Now, caballero, a last word. I trust to your skill in preserving your incognito. Should any one challenge you as being an Americano, you must stoutly deny it. Swear you're not the man he mistakes you for; but one Don Elezario Tres Villas, a *haciendado* from the State of Guadalajara. Luckily I have a card of the said Don Elezario, which will assist you in the personation. Here, take it."

Slipping the bit of cardboard into my hand, he pushed in the door and entered. I had no difficulty in following him now, the opened door letting out a flood of light which filled the court to its furthest corner.

There had been loud talking before we stepped inside, with some disjointed phrases at intervals, pronounced in louder tone, as "*Caballo en la puerta.*" "*Soto mozo,*" which might be unintelligible to a stranger, though I quite understood them, recognizing the call words in the game of *monté*.

The buzz of conversation ceased as the occupants of the room turned their eyes upon us, the new-comers. Only for a second; then it was resumed, half drowning the monotonous cries of the game, which had continued without interruption.

There was no mistaking the character of the place. At a glance I recognized the regular "hell"; and not much more was needed to convince me that there was good reason for the precautions my companion had taken, and the cautions he had given me. There were fifty or more men in the room, which was a large *sala*, lit up with numerous lamps, its brilliance in striking contrast with the darkness outside. They were dressed in many different kinds of costumes, as a mixed assemblage of Mexicans must needs be. I saw around me uniforms of every arm, with insignia denoting all ranks, from the general down to the *alferez* or sub-lieutenant. But most were in civilian dress; some, as myself, wearing the garb *ranchero*, others in broadcloth jackets and trousers of the ordinary cut, with not a few carrying on their shoulders the coarse *frezada*, their scowling brows shadowed by *sombreros* of felt, glaze, or straw. Excepting the officers, and not all of them, I never looked upon so many sinister faces—save once, when making my inspection of the Red Hats—and between those and these there was not much to choose. Nearly every one present might be taken for a bandit, nor would any great mistake have been made in so believing him, since a goodly proportion of them were professional robbers, highwaymen, and footpads, as I afterward learnt. This explained their ardent patriotism, or its pretense, as it gave them protection against the laws they had offended—for the time absolving them from the ban of outlawry. And who could blame the Mexican authorities for permitting this sort of thing? Certainly not we, the Americans, who at that moment had a band of these same *salteadores* in our service, receiving pay, even petted by our commander-in-chief!

Up to this time I had not told the colonel of lancers why I wished to accompany him to La Lechuzita. Nor did I now make him any the wiser, he not seeming to care. For, soon as entering the room, and shaking hands with some half-score individuals, his old army *camarados*, who stepped out to greet him, he took a seat at the *monté* table, and commenced laying his stakes. As I was in no humor for gambling, and came not for such purpose, I immediately set about that which had enticed me into the Little Owl—this being to find out, whether he whom I had ducked in the canal were the individual spoken of by Espinosa as Don Hilario, otherwise "El Guapo."

Sauntering round the saloon, smoking a cigarrito with as much nonchalance as though I were the oldest *habitué* of the hell, I scanned every face. Several of them I had seen before, in the *cafés* and on the streets; luckily none with which I was very familiar, or whose owner could claim acquaintance with me. And none that in any way resembled that I had such reason to remember.

Having at length lost hope of seeing him, I thought of asking the colonel to forsake his play, and give me *congé* as far as the street door, when that of the *sala* was pushed open, to discover a man entering the room—my man to a certainty! But now with no scarlet band around his *sombrero*, nor other insignia to show he was one of the Red Hats. Instead, he was apparelled as when first I saw him on the Paseo de las Vigas. I had no need to ask Espinosa if this was Don Hilario, for, as he stepped across the threshold there was another lull in the conversation, and I heard a man near me exclaiming:

"*Mira! El Guapo!*"

Making direct for the *monté* table, he passed close to where I stood, luckily without recognizing me. As a matter of course I did not desire his doing so, but the very reverse. At that moment identification on his side would have been dangerous to me, and Don Elezario's card of but little service. El Guapo knew my face too well to mistake me for the *haciendado* of Guadalajara.

And now, having accomplished all that I had come for, I wanted to be away, and would have left La Lechuzita on the instant, but for the necessity of waiting on him who had conducted me thither. Something besides courtesy compelled me to this.

Fortunately, for me at least, on this night as before, the colonel's luck ran against him, and soon all his checks, with the coin he had exchanged for them, were ruthlessly raked in by the claws of the croupier. I was rather glad, than otherwise, to see a couple of gold pieces he made free to borrow from me go the same way. Then, accepting my excuses that I hadn't another *peso* on my person, he reluctantly rose from the gaming-table, and soon we were once more outside the Little Owl.

As we walked back to his lodging, he asked me, for the first time, why I had been so desirous to visit the gambling-house, where I had not staked so much as a *peseta*! To which interrogatory I made evasive answer, saying:

"Curiosity, Señor Coronel—that and the love of adventure."

"*Caspita!*" he exclaimed. "A rash proceeding on your part, had you but known it. Let me tell you now, señor, if in the place we've just left you had been recognized as an officer of the American army, at least a dozen machetés would have been run through your ribs, despite all the protection I could have given you. *Santísima!* there were wolves there, who'd have been only too delighted to tear you limb from limb. Give thanks to God you've got clear of them. Sincerely may you say, as I on your behalf, *Gracias a Dios!*"

My visit to La Lechuzita turned out less profitable than I had expected. I had gone not alone to discover whether Don Hilario was the double of my Red Hat, but if so, to mark him down for future and closer inspection—which I did.

All to no purpose, for, although I set a watch upon the Little Owls, and for several nights after kept a detail of guard ready to gripe my man, he came not there again.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE LETTER AND AN ARREST.

DURING our occupation of the Mexican capital, the policing of the place, as already said, was done by the soldiers of our army. Certain regiments were employed upon this delicate duty, chief among them the "Rifles"—the men of this arm being of a superior class, more intelligent, better educated, and, as a consequence, more trustworthy. Both the mounted and foot companies were indifferently detailed for it; the former, on such occasions, acting as infantry. Of course we, their officers, took our regular twenty-four hours' *tour* guard duty—not regimental guard, but ranging over the whole city.

About a week had elapsed since our supper at the *Espíritu Santo*, and I was on duty as "officer of the guard." The night had come on, and in my perambulations—not restricted to place—I was spending an hour or two in that I deemed pleasantest—the "Teatro Nacional"—a theater at the time considered one of the finest in the world, taking rank with the La Scala of Milan, or Tacon of Havana. Certainly, as I have seen it—filled with the fashion of the Mexican capital, its *palcos* and dress circle occupied by the dark-eyed, dark-haired señoritas, resplendent in silk and sparkling with diamonds—I doubt whether any theater or opera-house elsewhere could present a much prettier array. Just then a company of Spanish comedians had possession of it—most of the actors in Mexican theaters being from Spain. As there was a distinguished "star" of the feminine specialty, named Cañete, to appear on that night, the boxes were filled by the "*familias principales*," and the flirting of fans, with flirting of another kind, was something for a stranger to see.

The play was "Don Juan Tenorio," the original of all the Don Juans, Giovannis, and Césars de Bazans; which, as enacted in Spanish theaters, occupies all of two nights; so that if the first be a "hit" the manager may be sure of a "bumper" on the second.

This night chanced to be the second; and between two of the many acts of the continued play, I stepped out to the front of the theater, for the purpose of giving some instruction to the sentries I had placed there. Just as I had finished, and was about to go inside again, a voice struck on my ear, saying:

"*Señor Capitan!* may I have a word with your excellency?"

As there was no one else near, I knew the speech must be meant for myself; and turning, I beheld the speaker—a ragged fellow, whom, after a look, I recognized. For it was the *pelado* who had so politely answered my interrogatories

on the Paseo Las Vigas, and whose proffer of further service I so indignantly rejected.

I was about to repel him as before, when a thought restrained me—about the Indian girl. Since the day she had imprinted on my hand that kiss of gratitude, so pleasant to remember, I had not seen her. Nor yet her brother. Their boat came no more to market; and, recalling what the youth said, I had begun to despair of its ever coming more. And here was one who professed acquaintance with them. He might tell me something I was longing to know. Instead, therefore, of acting in obedience to my first instinct, and driving him off, I said in response:

"Certainly, my good fellow. What do you wish to say?"

"Not much, señor; but first let me thank you for the concession. At our last interview, if your excellency can remember it, you cut my speech rather short. I had reason to feel offended, and wouldn't likely be approaching you again, if 'twere only on my own account—which it isn't."

"On whose, then?" I asked, my heart beating quick as I put the question.

"That of one who holds your excellency in high esteem. Ah! more, worships—adores you."

It was not in man to do otherwise than I did—reiterate my interrogatory in a changed form, with most anxious alacrity:

"Who?"

Nor was it in mortal man to feel otherwise than I—happy to the heart's core, on hearing the answer:

"La Reina de los Lagos."

On his giving it, I forgot all the disgust with which he had originally inspired me, and was but too glad to listen for what he had further to say—even impatiently demanding it. His air and bearing betokened his having more to communicate.

"Well, your excellency," he continued, evidently noting my eagerness, "as I've told you, I haven't much to say. In this matter, my duty is more in the way of doing. I've been employed as post-carrier. So let the *muchachita* speak for herself. Perhaps you may listen to her, with greater patience than you seem desirous of according to me." At which he drew something white from under his *frezada*, adding, as he handed it to me, "*Una billetita*."

Leaving him, I walked up to one of the lamps, by the light of which I read the superscription on the "*billetita*"—a quaint affair, covering nearly the whole of the envelope. It ran, or rambled thus:

"Por el Capitan, Comandante de los dragones, en cuartel acerco al Paseo de Las Vigas." (For the captain, in command of the dragoons quartered near the Paseo Las Vigas.)

My men were not dragoons; but the mistake was understandable, and the letter, as I knew, meant for myself.

Breaking it open, I read:

"SEÑOR MUY ESTIMADO: When last I saw you, you said you were curious to see a chinampa. If you're still in the same mind, perhaps you would come and see ours. My father and brother will both make you welcome; and need I say myself, also? Ah, señor! when I think of what you did for me, how could it be otherwise? *Salvador mio!* I shall ever remember you with gratitude, and would be so glad to see you again. But that cannot be, unless you come here; for father will not let me go any more to the city. Say you will come then—for my sake!"

"LORITA."

"Postscriptum.—Our chinampa is in Lake Chalco, beyond Tlalhuac. But you won't need any one to guide you, as the bearer of this who is an old friend of father and knows the way, will bring you in his boat."

I read this note with mingled emotions, varied and at variance with one another—surprise, pleasure and pain! Surprised at its having been written at all, and pleased, flattered, by the sentiments it contained; but pained at their *bizarrerie*—indeed boldness. I thought of the hints he, the bearer of it, had thrown out at our first interview, of how easily such conquest could be achieved; I thought of the insinuations of Colonel Espinosa, and more, the facts of which he professed himself to have been witness. And this letter seemed to bear out all! "For my sake—Lorita!" Certainly a strange expression, considering I had never spoken words of love, nor even flattery, to her who used it! And her calling me "*Salvador*," after what Colonel Espinosa said he had seen between her and the man from whom I had saved her, was deception inconceivable! I could almost now believe, that her kissing my hand had a motive different from that to which I had attributed it! Not strange, then, my being pained, more than gratified, by the contents of the singular epistle.

Still, I might be wronging her. Surely I must be, and all could be explained. The note was in a masculine hand; therefore not written by herself, for likely enough she could not write. Done, no doubt, by one of those public scribes, called *evangelistas*, of whom there is one in every Mexican village, and many in the larger towns and cities. Possibly Tlalhuac boasted of such a *litterateur*, and she had employed him, dictating the general sense of what she meant to say, he putting in the sentimental passages,

which he supposed would gratify the receiver. I knew the *evangelistas* had such a habit.

Looking at the letter in this light, I was less disposed to find fault with it, and altogether inclined to accept the invitation so unexpectedly received. Face to face with her who had sent it, I should, perchance, have an opportunity of finding out whether she was that I had first supposed, and still could not help believing—a pure, guileless girl—or the deceiving one circumstances seemed to declare her.

All this passed through my mind in less than a minute's time; and, returning to the messenger, who stood awaiting, and as I could see narrowly watching me, I said:

"This note tells me you have a boat."

"Si, señor; a *servicio de V.* Your excellency may not be aware that I am a *pescador*."

"Ah! you're a fisherman?" He looked anything but like it. "Well, can I have your boat to-morrow morning?"

"Undoubtedly, señor; the boat with your humble servant to row it. Where, and at what hour, might your excellency wish it to await you?"

I reflected a moment. Morning parade would be over by ten o'clock; but to make sure, I fixed the time at eleven, and the place by the bridge over the canal, close to my quarters. Another reflection suggested the prudence of the inquiry:

"How much do you expect to be paid for taking me to these chinampas? I mean where?"

"Oh! your excellency," he interrupted, seeing that I was puzzled to name the place, "I quite comprehend."

"How much, then?"

"Not a *claco*."

"Oh! nonsense, my man! You're not so very rich, I take it, as to throw away your time in such profitless fashion."

"I'm as poor as was San Lazaro, S'ñor Capitan. Still, I can afford to give that little bit of service gratuitously, to you, whose debtor I am for one much greater, as I've already said to you."

Once more I made scrutiny of the fellow's face; but, for the life of me, could not remember having ever seen him before—save that once on the Paseo las Vigas. Much less could I recall the service he seemed so anxious to requite. Again appealing to him to declare it, as before, he declined, saying:

"No matter about that, señor. I'd rather not speak of it now. To-morrow, when we're on the way to the chinampas, or returning, I promise to be more communicative."

"Be it so. But you must name a sum for the use of your boat. I can't think of having it a whole day without paying for it."

"Not a *claco*!" this time pronouncing the words with emphatic firmness. "You may think me over-generous, or over-grateful. But, your excellency does not seem to be aware that there's somebody else has a say in this matter. What would *La bella* think of me, if in taking to her one she so much wishes to—"

"Enough!" I said, interrupting; "you'll be by the canal bridge at eleven. Can I depend on you?"

"Sure as the cathedral clock, S'ñor Capitan, you'll find me there with my boat. Buenas noches, Excellenza! *Hasta la mañana*," (till to-morrow.)

Then raising his hat and giving it a sweep Chesterfield might have envied, he glided off and out of sight.

That night was for me one of surprises. And quick ones, another occurring almost on the instant. Just as the *pelado* disappeared, and I was reëntering the theater, a Mexican youth, of the class *rico*, came rushing toward me, as he approached crying out:

"Oh, señor! come with me! come with me!"

"Where and for what?"

"To our box. There's a man there behaving—rudely—insulting my sisters."

"What sort of man?"

"Un *official Americano*." (An American officer.)

"An American officer insulting ladies! You must be mistaken, *muchachito*."

"No, indeed, señor; 'tis as I tell you. Oh, caballero! come, quick!"

I had already started after the youth, and was following him along the corridor behind the boxes, in the belief that some drunken soldier had climbed out of the pit into the box occupied by the party. For it seemed incredible that any of our officers should be acting as described.

On reaching the box door, which was open, I saw it was a private *palcó*, curtained all round. Inside it were four individuals; two of them young ladies, both beautiful I could see, despite the shadow in which they stood, or rather crouched. For they were off their seats cowering in a corner of the box, a stout elderly gentleman standing guard between them and a younger man in uniform, who seemed doing his best to be nearer them. The house was in an uproar, from pit to gallery, with cries of "*Verguenza!*" "*Guardia!*" and the Spanish synonym for "Turn him out!"

To my astonishment, *chagrin*, too, I saw that

the uniform was of our army—undress blue frock, silver facings, shoulder straps without bar—a second lieutenant of infantry! But it did not need these insignia to tell me the officer's rank, nor the arm of the service to which he belonged. A glance in his face enabled me to identify the man, Lieutenant Sullivan of the 4th Infantry regiment—a young Irishman, late promoted from the ranks for a gallant deed done in battle. Brave but bad, a drunken brute and bully, whose promotion, instead of reforming, had but further driven him to drink, with its kindred excesses. I saw he was intoxicated, then—so helplessly as to have difficulty in keeping his feet. No excuse, however, for so misbehaving himself; nor did I wait for his offering one. A file of the guard, seeing there was something amiss, had followed me from the vestibule, and to them I gave the order for his instant arrest—that without the slightest ceremony, notwithstanding his shoulder-straps. As they seized hold of him he struggled and swore fearfully. But to no purpose. He was dragged out and off to the guard-house prison, there to pass the remainder of the night.

I might have lingered a little longer in that private box, listening to sweet words of gratitude, but for the necessity of seeing Mr. Sullivan bestowed. Yielding to this, I bowed myself out of it, without asking either the name or address of the gentleman to whom it belonged. Possibly, but for the *billetita* I had just stowed away in my breast pocket, with thoughts of the morrow, I would not have been so careless about making his acquaintance.

CHAPTER IX.

TREACHERY OR DECEPTION?

In that elevated plain, known as the Valley of Mexico, lying over seven thousand feet above the level of the sea, are six large lakes. Humboldt and other travelers speak of only five. Notwithstanding there are six of them; four in the northern section of the valley, the largest, Tezcoco, occupying an area of a hundred square miles. The waters of these northern lakes are more or less impregnated with salt—Tezcoco so much, that one bathing in it will have his skin incrustated with a whitish substance resembling hoar frost; while often wild fowl that alight upon it, and remain too long, get their wing pinions so glued together as to render them incapable of flying up again.

Around the edges of these saline sheets of water all is sterility, as on the shores of the Dead Sea. Vegetation shrivels, if it does not altogether refuse to show itself, and only those plants flourish to which a salitrose soil is congenial.

Altogether different the two lakes, Chalco and Xochimilco, which occupy the southern portion of the valley, these together having a superficial extent almost equaling that of Tezcoco. They might indeed be regarded as one, but for a narrow neck of land between—the *calzada* of Tlalhuac, along which marched the *conquistadores*, making their first approach on Tenochtitlan. This isthmus must have been even narrower then; for it is well known that great subsidence has since taken place in the waters of these lakes, as also a silting up. Tezcoco, at the present day, has in no place a depth of over six feet.

As for Chalco and Xochimilco, neither can any longer be called a lake, in the proper signification of the word, both being overgrown with a thick sedge, so that throughout their whole extent a fleck of open water is scarce anywhere to be seen. But, unlike Tezcoco, their waters are sweet, with not a trace of saline mixture, and under a sky of eternal spring, or summer, it need scarce be said that the vegetation in and around them is grandly luxuriant.

This is composed of many kinds of aquatic plants, all the different species of *cyperus* and *scirpus*, with bog beans, and bulrushes, by the Mexican named *tulares*. But, although neither of these lakes has any great depth, rarely over five or six feet, the plants so covering them do not spring up from the bottom; instead, having their roots in a stratum which floats on the surface, this consisting of the living roots themselves, with the *débris* of decayed leaves and stalks intermingled—the whole forming a fibrous mass which resembles mat-work.

In the language of the country it is called *cinta*; and, as will presently be seen, has much to do with the formation of the "floating gardens"—about which Humboldt, with Prescott, and others following him, has given an erroneous account. Indeed, their mode of construction is even still a puzzle to the European *savant*. Nor is it much better understood by Mexicans themselves—that is, those who reside in cities. So far as I am aware, no traveler, ancient or modern, has explored that vast wilderness of swamp occupying the south-eastern portion of the Mexican valley, while to dwellers in the capital itself it is almost as much a *terra incognita*.

The more was I desirous to make exploration of it; above all to see some of the famed floating gardens, which I had been told existed there. And now that circumstances had invested them with a new interest, my desire to pay them a visit was greater than ever. So, I was

punctual to a minute with the fisherman and his boat.

He also proved true to time and promise; for at the hour appointed I found him by the canal bridge, seated in his craft awaiting me.

It struck me that he looked a little surly, on seeing that I was accompanied. I had asked a brother-officer, Lieutenant Crittenden, of the dragoons, to go with me; and he was along. Whatever the cause of his displeasure, however, the boatman got over it, on our presenting him with a packet of *cigarritos*, which he accepted with a "muchas gracias." Then lighting one, he commenced working his oars, and we were off.

For the first four or five miles our way was through a low-lying tract of land, past the

After entering among the sedges, we gave but little heed to our boat or boatman, our attention being taken up with the scenery—forms of vegetation so new to us, and strange species of wild fowl, which, disturbed by our intrusion upon their solitary domain, gave out cries of alarm as they rose up in flocks, and flew around us.

This, after a time, becoming monotonous, we desisted from observing it, and bent our eyes upon the *pescador*—to see that he was making but poor progress, managing his craft rather clumsily, as one not much accustomed to oars, or certainly little skilled in the use of them. Strange that, his calling of fisherman considered. But he may not have been long engaged at it, and therefore without much practice as an oarsman. Thus reasoning, we let our

know the individual on the bank. What seemed strange was, that they should pass one another without bidding "Buenas dias," a discourtesy uncommon in Mexico, even among strangers. For the two had not saluted, either by word or gesture! Still, they might be acquaintances without being friends.

Why my comrade and I should have any apprehension of danger may call for explanation. It is easily given. Though our army had conquered most part of the country, and several brigades were quartered in its capital, the Mexicans still maintained a form of government in the city of Queretaro, with a force of troops numerically strong; while bands of *guerilleros* abounded. Many of these were no better than robbers, but so much the worse for those of our



AT WHICH I LIFTED HIM FROM HIS LEGS, AND WITH AN OUTWARD JERK SHOT HIM OVER INTO THE CANAL.

pueblos of Istacaleo, Mexicalzingo, and Culhuacan. Beyond Tomatlan the canal enters Lake Xochimilco, through which it runs longitudinally, toward the lake's southern end. But before reaching this, it turns abruptly eastward, and crossing the Calzada of Tlalhuac, through an artificial cutting, it continues on through the sister lake, to the ancient town of Chalco on its eastern shore. Other minor waterways intersect the marsh, communicating with various villages around its edge, as also with one or two situated upon islands, as Xico and Mezquico. These branches, called *acalotés*, are all narrow lists, kept open by the boat traffic, which along many of them is considerable. Sometimes, however, from violent storms, or other causes, portions of the quagmire become detached, and drifting about, close up the canals, or change their courses, so that new routes have to be taken

surprise pass away, without communicating it to the man.

Going so slowly, however, it was after two o'clock when we reached Tlalhuac, and entered the cutting which carries the canal across into Lake Chalco. We could see there was a village on the calzada close by, inhabited by Indians, as could be told by the style and character of the dwellings. But, while regarding these from the boat, I observed several men moving about the place, who appeared to be either whites or *mestizos*, as they were dressed in a fashion quite unlike the simple garb of the Lake Indian. Moreover, as we passed through the narrow water gorge, a man standing on the bank above, he certainly not an Indian, appeared to exchange a look of intelligence with our boatman.

Of itself there was nothing in this. A fisherman would naturally be acquainted with the people of Tlalhuac, and as natural for him to

soldiers who had the misfortune to fall into their hands—as some actually had. A fatal mischance; since they were murdered without mercy—in many instances mutilated! And this often close to our camp, or barracks, within gunshot of our sentries. One poor fellow of my own company, taking a solitary stroll outside the suburbs of the capital, and not six hundred yards from where his comrades were in quarters, had been thus assassinated; after death, a cross cut on his forehead, with two others deep gashed into the soles of his feet.

It will scarce be wondered at then, that we began to feel misgivings, even regret for having entered upon the excursion at all.

We had both taken the precaution to put on Mexican dresses, and as I had already been complimented on my resemblance to the native, there need be nothing to fear on my account. Crittenden, however, could lay no claim to such

similitude. His complexion was a bright rufous, his hair red as a carrot.

In truth was there reason for our apprehensions. There were we, in the midst of a very maze of marsh, among bulrushes and other aquatic plants, so tall as far to overtop our heads—in a boat gliding along narrow water stretches—rowed by a man having aught but an amiable countenance—quite a stranger to us, or what we knew of him anything but in his favor! He could conduct us whithersoever it might please him—perhaps into some den of salteadores, to be set upon and slain by them without the slightest compassion!

But why should he do so? That was the question, *per contra*, which came up to tranquilize us. Barring a little rudeness on our first inter-

est; instead, further excited them. The worst of it was, we could not communicate with one another, even by signs. For the fellow, as we sat in the stern, had his face toward, and all the time his eyes fixed on us. True, we spoke a language he *ought* not to understand; but the rascal, despite his raggedness, seemed so full of accomplishments, I thought it just possible he *might* have picked that up, or a smattering of it, in his intercourse with our soldiers. Other Mexicans had done so, of the same class as he.

By this, we had forsaken the main canal, which crosses the lake to Chalco, and turned northward along one of the lesser acalotes. He said it was the way to the place we were bent for. Not a direct one, at all events, but crooked as could well be; curving and zigzagging to

he continued, "We haven't much further to go now. In another hour or so, we shall reach our journey's end."

"Another hour!"

"Si, señor. Surely you don't think that much?"

"So much, it will leave but little time for us to get back to the city before night."

"But do your excellencies intend returning to-night?"

"Of course we do."

"Caramba! I didn't know that. I supposed you meant staying over night with the family on the chinampa."

"We meant nothing of the sort; and don't now."

"Well, caballeros; it won't be absolutely impossible to get back to the city, this night,



THE INDIAN GIRL HALF STARTED UP AND SAT HANGING OVER THE EDGE OF THE HAMMOCK.

view, I had offered him no offense afterward; while he, on his side, kept telling me he was my debtor for some service I had done him. This was a mystery which still needed clearing up; and as he had promised me the *eclaircissement* some time during our journey, it now occurred to me to remind him of his promise. Something might come of it to allay our apprehensions.

"I would willingly do so, Señor Capitan," he said, in answer to my appeal. "But," he continued, with a look toward Crittenden, "it so chances that the friendly turn, for which I'm under obligations to your excellency, was of a somewhat private nature, and can only be spoken of to yourself. Therefore, I trust you will not press me, till a fitter opportunity offers."

Of course I could not insist; though his reticence had the effect of making my curiosity keener than ever. Nor had his *unverdone* anything to remove our suspicion; of his hon-

every quarter of the compass, as we could tell by the sun, at one moment shining in our faces, the next being behind our backs!

For all of three good hours we were occupied in this tortuous navigation; which caused me surprise, as renewed apprehension. For I remembered the young Indian having said, their chinampa was not such a great distance beyond Tlalhuac. We must have already come three or four leagues, since leaving this place, and still no signs of a chinampa!

Making known to our boatman what the Indian had told me, I received for response, and in whisper meant only for myself:

"Ah! Señor Capitan; that muchachito has been telling you a fib. Natural he should; seeing he'd been put up to it by the sister. She wants you to come; and for that reason represented the distance less than it is." Then raising his voice, and addressing himself to both of us,

though late. And if your excellencies promise not to dally too long on the floating gardens, I'll do the best I can for you. But it's very fascinating among those flowers; especially in the company of that charming *muchacha*. And once there, El Capitan, if I mistake not, won't care to change his quarters much before morning; the *alcalde* is very hospitable, and the Queen is—"

"Row on, sirrah! Row on!" I cried out, angrily, displeased with allusions, which had more than once given me disgust; and now angered by the evident deception practiced—by whom?

"Oh, certainly," he rejoined, with a look more rebellious than obedient, at the same time pretending to apply himself more industriously to the oar.

It was now well on in the afternoon, and my comrade and I began to think we were really in

for a night of it. There was but scant chance left of our getting back to the city before morning. Indeed, none at all, unless, favored by a moon, of which there seemed little likelihood. For the sky was now clouded all over, as it had been for the past hour or so. Awkward, if we did not report ourselves that same night; since, for a short excursion, as we had supposed ourselves starting upon, neither had obtained leave of absence at head-quarters, nor thought of asking for it. As concerned myself, it did not matter much. In a sort of way I held an independent command, being superior officer of the detachment stationed at Las Vigas. But Crittenden had a captain over him, a very martinet of a disciplinarian, who might not be so satisfied, but instead very angry with his subaltern for such seeming neglect of duty. However, there was no help for it now, in either case; and so reflecting, we made up our minds to bother no more about it. Sufficient for that day was the evil thereof, and it might be more.

"Mira! Las chinampas!" called out our boatman; and looking ahead we at length saw the famed "Floating Gardens."

CHAPTER X.

THE FLOATING GARDENS.

Now that we had as good as reached the goal of our journey, all doubts of our boatman's fidelity passed out of our minds, or for the time were no more dwelt upon. We were too much interested in the novel spectacle which had come under our eyes to think of aught else. And novel it was. The boat had shot into a sheet of open water, semicircular in shape, and having a diameter of about a mile. Ranged along this last, in a row, nearly regular, were some scores of little thatched huts, or *chozas*, at equal distances apart—evidently dwellings, since there was smoke rising over most of them.

As we drew nearer we could see that each stood on its own plot of ground, as so many detached laborers' cottages with gardens in front. There were gardens there, too, but instead of being contiguous, with a brick wall or timber paling between, they were separated by water drains, about the width of a canal. Alongside each lay a large, flat-bottomed boat, of the punt pattern; and by most, a smaller craft, either skiff or canoe; while their owners were observed standing beside the boats or moving about among the flower-plots, some in the act of cultivating them. By the doors of the huts sat or stood dark-skinned, black-haired women of all ages, most of them wearing only a petticoat, girt loosely over their loins, and a sleeveless chemise but scantily covering their breasts, while around them played children of both sexes, almost in a state of nudity, their smooth brown skins giving them the appearance of little images of bronze, fresh from the casting mold.

Our boatman had already admonished us that the chinampa of Don Tito was at the further end of the row, and we should have to pass all the others to reach it. So had we; and as we were rowed along their front I saw sufficient to confirm the account I had received of these curious gardens, and that they were afloat, surely enough. Even the slight waves from our skiff caused a perceptible undulation throughout the whole line, while those nearest rose and fell, as rafts or canal boats disturbed by a passing steamer.

On seeing our boat, their owners—men, women and children—ran out to their gardens' extreme ends, and stood gazing at us in astonishment, as though it were a sight rather strange to them. I, on my side, fancied that among their faces was more than one I had seen before—which was likely enough, since nearly all of them were market-gardeners, and must have often passed by Las Vigas on their way to the Mercada de San Domingo. They said nothing, however; nor did we offer to enter into conversation with them, but kept on to the further extremity of this Transatlantic Venice, where dwelt its Doge. On nearing it we perceived a chinampa, of larger size than any of the others, with a cabin of somewhat more pretentious appearance—clearly the residence of the *alcalde*.

"That's the one you're bound for, caballeros," said the boatman, pointing to it over his shoulder. "I'll set you out upon it; and then I must ask the indulgence of your excellencies to spare me for a little while. I've an old acquaintance near the other end with whom I wish to have a bit of gossip. You won't need me on the chinampa; and," he added, with a leer, "no doubt El Capitan would prefer being without me."

"My good fellow," I said, more than ever annoyed at his impertinent speeches, "you can go where you please." I had almost added, that his company was not so very agreeable, but the thought that we were dependent on him and his boat for taking us back hindered me from coming to a rupture with him. Besides, we were now approaching the *palace* where dwelt the Queen of the Lakes, and that kept my spleen under restraint.

"Gracias!" he grinned out: "I shall avail myself of your excellency's kind permission."

"Be sure you get back in—in—say an hour. We can't possibly stay longer."

"An hour will be enough for me; or less, if your excellency so orders it."

"Oh! you can take an hour."

We had now arrived at the chinampa, and the boat being brought up alongside we stepped out upon the unstable ground, which sensibly trembled beneath our feet.

Soon as out of his craft, the pescador, taking off his hat, and saluting us with a "*Hasta luego!*" (till presently), rowed himself off again.

Rather glad to be rid of him, if only for a short while, we did not look after or take note of the way he went. Our eyes were turned in the opposite direction, making survey of the singular spot on which we had set foot. Only the upper part of the cabin was visible, some tall flowering plants and shrubs screening it below. No one was seen around it, nor heard we human voice. Something we at first took for this turned out to be but the talk of a speaking parrot, which, with other exclamations, at intervals called out: "*Lora—Lora—Lorita!*"—its own name in truth. We thought the silence strange, as also no one appearing to greet us. But our boatman had made very little noise with his oars; besides he spoke in a low tone at taking leave, and they might be inside the hut without having heard us. Or, was the whole family abroad on a visit to some other chinampa? This could hardly be. We had passed all the others, and if on any of them they would surely have seen, and hastened home to receive us. More likely they were inside the cabin.

From where we had landed a path led off between the flower-plots, and without reflecting further we struck along it. All was fragrance around; flowers in full bloom, though it was December! As we drew near, the parrot once more called, "*Lora—Lorita—ita—ita!*" when a small hairless dog came out of the door, and seeing us ran in again, angrily growling. Once more the caged creature called the familiar name, but louder and more excitedly, following it up with a series of clucks. But now sounds of sweeter tone became mingled with the harsh notes of the beast and bird—a soft feminine voice saying:

"What's frightened you, *guacamaya mia*? And you, *perro*; why do you growl so? It must be father and brother got home; I thought I heard oars. Yes; there they are!"

By this my comrade and I had come close up to the door, which stood open; and looking through some vines trellised in front we saw the interior of the cabin. An interesting spectacle it presented, in keeping with the scene around. A young Indian girl was reclining in a *hamaca* which was stretched between two of the uprights that supported the roof. More correct to say lately reclining; for, on hearing our footsteps she had half-started up, and now sat with one limb, nude to the knee, hanging over the edge of the hammock. In another instant, seeing us, she sprung out of it, and came forth, her looks showing surprise, and some little alarm. It quite disconcerted me, expecting a very different sort of reception. But I had forgotten my disguise, and that I might not be recognized. Neither was I on the instant, nor until I spoke, saying:

"Señorita, I hope you'll not deem us intruders in thus coming to visit you without first having sent word. But—"

"Oh, caballero!" she exclaimed, interrupting. "Is it indeed you?"

The change which came over her countenance was a more eloquent welcome than could be conveyed by any words; for though there was still a trace of wonder in her eyes, the alarm seemed to have passed away. Withal, the expression did not satisfy, but rather puzzled me—so unlike that of one who had indited such an invitation. In warmth the welcome did not correspond with the contents of the *billetita*. Still, there was a third party present, who was a stranger to her.

Consoling myself with this, I was about proceeding to further apologies, when the rattling of oars in their rowlocks struck upon our ears. At which the girl exclaimed, starting forward:

"That must be father and brother now! Oh, señors! I'm so glad they're home. Else how could I have entertained you?"

And she glided past us, on to the landing-place.

While she was gone my reflections were by no means of a pleasant nature, nor my comprehension of things clear. Glad that the father and brother had got home! Strange, that seemed to me, remembering what she had written.

As it turned out, only one of the two had arrived; the brother having remained behind at Chalco, where they had been on some business.

Introduction to the father followed; the easier as he knew all about what had happened in the canal at Las Vigas—for which he, too, was profuse in expressions of gratitude. Then succeeded our explanation as to why we were there, with the apologies interrupted by his coming.

The Indian, still only a middle-aged man, had all the air and bearing which might belong to a cacique; and soon as the first moments of embarrassment were over, courteously invited us to partake of such fare as his humble home af-

forded. An invitation neither of us was loth to accept, for by this we were both hungry as hyenas.

It ended in a table being spread inside the cabin, with viands of various kinds placed upon it. These came from a still smaller hut detached—a sort of kitchen—where an oldish Indian woman filled the office of *cocinera*.

While we were engaged on the domestics set before us—nearly all dishes of the ancient Aztec cuisine—the conversation turned to that which was the professed object of our visit—the chinampas.

"How are they constructed?" I asked of Don Tito, who sat by us at the table, though not eating. The girl had gone outside.

"That's easy enough," he answered; "nothing easier, caballero. It's only to saw them out of the cinta. When any one wants a chinampa he begins by hewing a ditch all around it, as you see with this of mine. Then floating the loose pieces out of the way, he gets at the bottom, where there's always plenty of mud. That drawn up, and laid thick over the growing rushes and other plants, soon kills them. When the mud gets dry, it only needs breaking up to make the very best of seed-beds; and will grow anything—vegetables, fruits, or flowers."

"But do you not first lay a foundation of sticks, or timber?"

I was thinking of the account of their construction given by certain historians and travelers, the truth of which I had long doubted.

"No, indeed," answered the Indian, with a stare of surprise. "Any one who did that would have more labor than profit, timber being so scarce round our lake. Besides, it wouldn't serve for such a purpose. A chinampa resting upon a raft of that kind would soon go to the bottom, with everything on it."

"Why does yours keep afloat, then?"

"Because it's not set upon sticks, but on what makes the cinta itself."

"What is that?"

"The roots of the plants growing on it, with their stalks and leaves when dead. They are all twined and warped together, sometimes three feet in thickness or even more. I can show you some slices cut straight down, that are nearer four feet wide. We use them as screens to protect the young plants from the sun, when it's too hot, and sometimes from the hailstones when it hails. The thing's as light as cork; that's why it will carry so much weight. Besides, it never rots—as would a raft of sticks."

"But why are your chinampas made so small, and drains cut around them? Would it not do as well if they were made larger, and on the cinta itself?"

"That would not do at all, señor. Where would the soil come from to make them with? And where the water for our plants, during the many months when we have no rain? We can always irrigate them from the sides, and get more mud from the bottom. That is needed to keep them in repair, as also to manure them; and if they were laid out very large, it would not be so convenient."

The philosophy of the "floating gardens" was now for the first time clear to my comprehension—that problem which has so long perplexed the *savans*—even to this day unsolved by them, though three centuries and a half have elapsed since Cortez and his companions first beheld them with wondering eyes, as they advanced to the conquest of Tenochtitlan!

CHAPTER XI.

BETRAYED.

HAVING, throughout all my life, a fondness for inquiring into curious habits and customs, I had listened with interest to the Indian's relation. Still not so much as under different circumstances, I might have done. A feeling of impatience, not to say uneasiness, had crept over me, which also affected my brother officer, as I could see by the way he was shifting about on his seat. Our uneasiness was greater after the expiration of the hour in which our boatman had promised to be back, and there was no sign of him. And when another half-hour elapsed without his showing himself, the apprehensions we had already felt returned in fuller force. What if he did not come at all? He might be drinking with his old crony, and have forgotten all about his engagement. And how were we to get back to the city? True, we might borrow a boat from our host, and find some one to row it; though for the rowing, we could do that ourselves. Money would make all right so far as the boat. And in the end the consequences could not be so serious; only a little later in reaching our respective quarters.

We might have reasoned thus, but did not. At least, not when we saw the sun nearly down, without seeing aught of the truant boatman. And now, with apprehensions excited to their utmost, my comrade and I recalled the various incidents of the day, which had led us to suspect his fidelity, with some others besides, known but to myself. We had long ere this finished our repast, and gone forth again among the flowers. I wanted to have a few words in private with the girl, but I could not find the op-

portunity, for all the while her father kept with us. What to me was strange enough, she did not seem to seek it, or at all events made no sign! Thinking of what had passed I could not comprehend her seeming indifference. Chagrined, almost irritated by it, I thought of hastening away from her presence; when at length I found myself alone with her, Crittenden and the alcalde having gone off behind the choza. I fancied that a change came over her features as her father passed out of sight. Turning to me, she said:

"You appear to be greatly interested in our chinampas. Why is that?"

"Because they are very curious."

"But have you never seen any before? I think you said you had not."

"I never have."

"And you have been in many other countries besides Mexico, have you not?"

"Yes, many; but Mexico is the only country in which there are chinampas."

"Indeed! I thought they were everywhere."

"Oh no; only here. Some are spoken of elsewhere, but they are not real floating gardens as these."

"Ah, then, that's why you were so curious to see them. I can now understand."

"Not altogether; there was another reason for my having a desire to visit them."

She bent her eyes on me inquiringly, as I thought and hoped, with some eagerness, asking:

"What was that, señor?"

The question caused me to hesitate. I dare not give the direct answer, which would have been to say, herself. Our acquaintance was not old enough for that.

"Well, for one thing, señorita," coming to it in a roundabout way, "I was desirous of knowing whether you had sustained any injury from that wetting in the canal, caught a cold, or something of the sort."

She laughed, like the brother had done when I spoke of sending a man for his boat.

"No, no. Not much fear of my catching a cold. Only the city people have that; never we here."

"And the fright did you no harm?"

"Nor that, señor. It might but for you. I knew you must still be near, that's why I shouted so. Then I saw you come galloping down the Paseo, and wasn't any longer afraid."

"You've never seen the ruffian since, I suppose?"

"How could I, señor? Since then we've never been to the city, either myself or brother. I feared—that is we thought—the red came to her cheeks as she changed the words—"we might never see you again. It is very kind of you to come here."

The air of perfect innocence with which all this was said quite delighted me. It corresponded with the *naïveté* of the note which I had mistaken for unbecoming boldness. And her speech recalling this, I rejoined:

"Far kinder of you to wish me come; and I ought to have sooner thanked you for the invitation."

Her eyes sought my face in surprise as she interrogatively echoed the word:

"Invitation?"

"Yes; that letter you wrote me yesterday. At least I received it yesterday; and, as you see, have answered it in person—soon as it was possible."

Her eyes opened wider in their wonder as she rejoined:

"I send you a letter, señor? Alas! I cannot write."

"And do you know nothing of this?"

I had brought the note with me, and drawing it out, held it before her face.

"Ah! neither can I read. What is it! What does it say, señor?"

It was my turn to be surprised, and something more. There was no mistaking her candor, thus questioning. Neither she, nor any evangelista for her, had written that letter; but some one else, and for a purpose very different to that I had supposed it indited. Sure was I now, that my life, as my comrade's, was in danger.

"No matter, señorita," I said, hastily returning the letter to my pocket, and making an attempt to laugh. "only a little joke that a friend's been playing upon me. However, I shall pay him back for it yet. But," I added, with a look at the setting sun, "it's time we were starting on our return, and if our boatman fail, I must ask your father to lend us some sort of craft—"

"Oh! he will do that willingly," she cried out, interrupting. "He has a skiff; but my brother—I wish he were here to go with you."

Just then Crittenden and the alcalde joined us, and I asked the latter whether it was possible for some one to be sent after our delaying boatman.

To which he made answer, by hailing a young fellow who was paddling past in his canoe, and ordering him to come up, an order promptly obeyed.

"Pepe!" he called to the canoe, "go along the line of chinampas, and find the boatman who brought these gentlemen here. By the way, señores, what's his name? If I knew

that I might be able to tell who he's gossiping with."

His name! Here was a poser. Neither I nor my comrade knew it, not caring and never having thought of asking for it from the man himself.

"Indeed, Señor Alcalde," I said, "we can't tell you; he is a stranger to us."

Long ere this I would have made inquiries about our boatman's cognomen, with other particulars respecting him, from Don Tito himself. But believing him to be, as he had represented, a friend of the family, I forbore, not wishing to let them know that we had doubts of his fidelity.

"No matter," returned the Indian; "go on, Pepe. Find him soon as you can. Say the gentlemen are waiting for their boat."

At which Pepe paddled off, sending his craft like an arrow through the water.

Soon as he was gone, thinking reticence no longer desirable, I turned to our host, saying:

"Señor Alcalde, although we don't know our boatman's name, I fancy I can give you a description by which you may identify him, seeing that he's an old friend of yours."

"An old friend of mine?"

"So he represents himself."

"Un Indio?"

"No; he's a mestizo, and follows the calling of pescador."

"A pescador! Strange, that is. I know of none, excepting among my own people. Nor can I think of any mestizo who should be calling himself my friend. It must be a mistake."

While he was speaking I had kept my eyes fixed on the girl's face; but no sign there, that the man we were speaking of was known to her. If he was, then must she be a mistress of deception; for, on her father appealing to her, she denied all knowledge of any such acquaintance, fisherman or otherwise.

All this only made my comrade and self more apprehensive. Indeed, we were now good as sure we had been tricked, and that there was trouble in store for us.

"A trap, by the Eternal!" exclaimed Crittenden, on hearing what I had to tell him. "Yes, old fellow; and we're in it, sure."

Still surer it seemed when the canoe man coming back, which he did the instant after, cried out:

"There's no stranger on any of the chinampas, Señor Don Tito. I've inquired at every one of them."

For a second or two the alcalde stood silent, apparently reflecting, then called out:

"Go back, Pepe! Try along the canal for Tlalhuac; you may find him there."

The canoe man, a lithe active fellow, shot his craft off again, and was soon out of sight. For by this the sun was down, and the purple of twilight had overspread the water. Don Tito, turning to us, continued:

"Being a pescador, as you say, señores, he may be employing his time to catch fish. There are some of large size in the deep water, just beyond where the acaloté enters the lake."

The conjecture was without probability; so we said to our host. And now that things were looking queer, we took him further into confidence, telling him all we knew of the boatman, and how we had come to engage him. Nothing, however, about the letter of invitation. Spurious though that was it would expose certain matters I preferred keeping to myself.

Still the alcalde did not think we were in any danger. There were no guerrilleros in that neighborhood; at least so far as he had heard. And if the pescador had played us a trick, it might be only to gratify some spite of his own, or for other reason unexplained.

"In the end," he said, winding up with words more comforting, "it won't matter so much, señores. I can give you a boat, or Pepe will take you in his canoe. I only wish my son was here, that I could send him along with you."

We were in the act of thanking him for his offer, when the canoe man was again seen making approach, paddling his craft as if in a regatta. Soon as within hailing distance he called out:

"Señor Alcalde! Señor Alcalde!"

"What is it, Pepe?"

"There are men coming along the acaloté. Three big boatfuls of them!"

"What sort of men?"

"I couldn't well see, your worship; only that they're strangers, and not of our people, but blancos. They're soldiers I think, for they have arms—guns and spears!"

Long before the frightened Pepe had reached the end of his report, my comrade and I could have finished it for him, and with better comprehension than he. We were at length convinced that the boatman had betrayed us, and that the men in the boats were the same we had seen hanging around the houses at Tlalhuac. Guerrilleros they might be, but more likely a band of real robbers, who designed making a coup by capturing us, and demanding a ransom. For the *riscatta* is as much a practice among the banditti of Mexico, as their brethren of Naples and the Abruzzi.

"I told you we were in for it," muttered Crittenden, looking anxious, but resolute. He was not the man to feel fear. "A devil of a fix it looks, too! How're we to get out of it, old fellow?"

"Heaven only knows; the best way we can. Have you your revolver ready?"

"I have; and it's good for six of them."

"Mine the same. If there's not too many, and we get anything like a fair chance, we may save ourselves yet. These Mexicans don't know what six-shooters are. In any case let us sell our lives dearly."

While this brief dialogue was passing between my comrade and myself, Don Tito, who had stepped out to the water's edge, was holding a like hurried conversation with the canoe man, also in undertone. But for a strong belief that I had secured his friendship, along with gratitude for his service, I had rendered him, I might have fancied that he, too—all were in conspiracy against us. To have suspected him, however, would have been a grievous wrong, as was proved by his after behavior. Parting from the canoe man, and hastening back to us, he said:

"Caballeros! after all I fear you may be in some danger. Who these armed men are I cannot tell. We've never seen such at our chinampas before, and I think they must be coming after you!"

"We think so too; are sure of it."

"Ah! you know something about them, then?"

"We have suspicions."

"And you don't wish to meet them?"

"Certainly not—anything but that."

"Well; there's a way by which you may avoid it."

"There is a way?"

"Si, señores; and time enough yet. Pepe is a skillful paddler, and by good luck has got here a good way ahead of them, as he tells me. You must go into his canoe, and he'll take you along an acaloté, where there's little fear of their following you. But there's no time for saying more. These boats, whoever they are, must be now nigh. Into the canoe, caballeros!"

"But yourself and—your daughter?"

I glanced at the girl, all the while standing by; the expression upon her features less of fear than anxiety. And all this on our account; as with excited speech she took part with her father, urging us to instant flight.

"Oh, señor!" she said to me in a half-whisper, and beseechingly. "There may be danger. Go: do so!"

"Have no care for us," was the alcalde's answer to my question. "Whoever the strangers be, we have no cause of quarrel with them, and they're not likely to have any with us poor chinamperos. Even if robbers, as you appear to think, there's nothing here to tempt them."

He seemed unconscious of the priceless treasure he had standing by his side. But not I, and I said:

"They may be rude, for all that."

"No danger, caballero," he rejoined, comprehending; "if they attempt to land on our chinampa, and I see sign of bad behavior, they won't find us at home. We have a boat behind, and there are ways through the cinta, known only to *Los Indios de las lagunas*. But now—now—you must be gone!"

And he commenced pushing toward the canoe. The next instant we were in it, and Pepe paddling off.

As we parted from the side of the chinampa, a last glance given me by the girl seemed to say that though she had not sent me, that letter of invitation, I was as welcome as if she had.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SWAMP-STORM.

It was now pitch dark; for, besides being night, the sky had become heavily overcast, portending one of those spasmodic storms common on the high table-lands. Thunder was rumbling at a distance, and an occasional flash of lightning lit up the firmament, while drops of rain, big as pistol-bullets, began to strike down upon the water's surface, still smooth. That it would not be long so could be predicted by the rushing noise heard up among the mountains, where a strong wind was making its way through their passes.

On parting from the chinampas, I observed that our canoe man had turned his craft in a direction the reverse to that by which we had approached them, and was heading for the opposite end of the open sheet. It was but a couple of hundred yards off, and on reaching it he shot the canoe into another acaloté.

Fifty yards further on, this separated into two branches; and I noticed that he took the right one, though the narrower. My seat was in the stern, and as the long *periqua* keeled round, I again caught a glance of the floating gardens, with lights here and there glimmering along their line like a row of street-lamps. The one nearest was burning inside the choza we had lately left—like enough reflected on that beautiful face still seeming before me. Just then a vivid blaze of lightning made everything clear as daylight, and I could distinguish the reed-thatched huts amid their embowering of shrubs and flowers. But my eyes rested not on them, for the same flash showed me three boats,

each with several men in it, out on the open water, and to all appearance making direct for the spot from which we had just parted! Instantly all was dark as before, with silence around us, save the measured plunging of the paddle; its double blade dealing strokes alternately on each side as though it were a pair of oars.

From the rate of speed at which our craft was now progressing, we need have no further fear of pursuit by those in the boats—whichever they might be, or however hostile. Nor thought I more about them, so far as we ourselves were concerned. But I had apprehensions, nevertheless, for those we had left behind, which I could not shake off. Despite the confident assurances of the Indian father, I did not share his confidence; instead, believed that, if not himself, his daughter was in danger. It was vain reflecting on it, since we could do nothing to avert it, and dismissing it from my mind, as much as possible, I turned to what more nearly concerned ourselves. Naturally, the first thought was, whither we were being taken. Up to this moment not a word had been said about that.

"Where are you paddling for, Señor Pepe?" I asked of the young Indian.

Don Tito had made us acquainted with his name, and I knew that the title prefixed would have an effect upon him favorable to ourselves. The Mexican Indian is always flattered at being addressed as "Señor."

"To San Isidro, your excellency. The alcalde directed me to take you there."

"And how far is it to San Isidro?"

"Oh, a very short distance; less than three leagues. If it don't get too dark, we should do it in the matter of an hour and a half, or two hours at most. There's a shorter way we could have gone—by the main *acaloté*. But his worship told me to take this, in fear those people in the boats might come after us. But he needn't have troubled his head about that. I could give them a mile in every two, and then they wouldn't see the waves my *canoa* had made in the water. *Caramba*, no!"

"But what when we get to this San Isidro? If I remember right, it lies near the Vera Cruz road, a good fifteen miles from the city."

It was Crittenden who now interrogated, thinking of a reprimand from his superior officer, the martinet.

"So it does, caballero," assentingly answered the Indian. "San Isidro is just fifteen miles from the *garita*."

"And how after that are we to get to the city?" eagerly questioned the lieutenant of dragoons. "Must we walk it?"

"Not unless your excellencies would prefer that way."

"Prefer walking! My good fellow, we are cavalymen, and not used to that sort of thing. Fifteen miles along a hard road—as I know the Vera Cruz causeway to be—would blister our feet so bad that to-morrow we couldn't set them in the stirrup."

"But, caballero," protested the canoeman, "there will be no need for you to walk."

"You think horses can be had at San Isidro, then?"

"I'm sure of it, s'ñor. Don Tito has a friend there who'll provide them. I have his worship's instructions to see that he does."

"How very thoughtful of Don Tito," said Crittenden, now addressing himself to me, in a tongue the other was not likely to understand; then adding: "He's a true gentleman, despite his copper-colored skin. As for the daughter, if hers wasn't a shade too dark for my taste, I shouldn't mind making love to her myself, in an honorable way."

"Indeed! I don't think you would succeed in any other, if you tried; and you mightn't even in that way."

There was the suspicion of a sneer in my rejoinder, all of which he could not have heard—perhaps as well he did not—for, drowning my last words came a clap of thunder that seemed to strike the quagmire by our side, causing it visibly to vibrate. It appeared also to open a passage for the wind, which now rushing down from the sierras began to make havoc among the jointed reeds, snapping them short off, while the tougher bulrushes waved about with a swishing, as of ten thousand whips. Still these were but the first gusts—the *avant couriers* of the tempest—which soon after broke over us, in full battalions of every arm—rain, wind, thunder and lightning, each seeming determined to outdo the others in the fury of its rage. Under the angry blast the tall sedge was tossed to and fro like foam on the ocean's waves, the waves themselves being represented by the swelling of the *cinta*, which rose and fell in grand but dangerous undulations.

"Can you go on through this?" I called out to the canoeman.

By his tardy response, more than his words, I felt certain he could not.

"Well, s'ñor; I could if the wind would only keep still a bit, and there was a little more light. Now, as you see, it's so dark an owl couldn't tell land from water. In this crooked *acaloté* it's but groping at best; and I only wish we'd taken the other."

"But what difference could that have made?"

"A great deal; the other's both straighter

and wider. Besides, I'm better acquainted with it. Not many go this way; and for myself, I've only been along it two or three times. Still I could easily make it out if it wasn't for the pitchy darkness. *Maldita sea!*"

"I suppose, then, you can't proceed further while the wind lasts?"

He had ceased stroke, and let his craft go bobbing about on the water.

"The wind I wouldn't so much mind, if there was light, which as you see, s'ñor, there isn't. If I attempt to keep on just now I might get astray—for this *acaloté* has no end of branches running out right and left. After taking the wrong one then—"

"What then?"

"There would be danger."

"Danger! How?"

"Ah! s'ñor, you don't know the *cinta*. If you'd been all your life in it as I, you would."

Crittenden laughed, I myself disposed to do the same. Danger in a swamp infested with alligators or crocodiles, we could understand. But there are none of these great reptiles in the valley of Mexico, as we well knew. Of what could the man be speaking?

I put the question to him, but cannot tell whether he heard it, or made reply. For the wild conflict of the elements, just then coming to its climax, drowned all sounds save their own.

And now the heavens overhead were at one moment a sheet of bluish yellow, in the next, pitch black, traversed by forked lightning that shot hither and thither athwart the firmament, like javelins flung red-hot from a furnace. The rain, too, came plashing down as from spouts. Of itself it would have bilged the canoe but for our continuous bailing. There was more likelihood of its careening over, as the blast struck it abeam; and to be spilled out there would be danger indeed. Though in water not much wider than an ordinary drain, with what appeared a bank and land on each side, we knew it was but the treacherous quagmire, which would scarce carry a cat. There was no firm footing nearer than that we had left behind—now miles behind. So the Indian told us, with a *sang froid* that would have been incomprehensible, had we not known the cause. He, a very beaver, could easily swim back to the chinampas—a feat to my brother officer and myself simply impossible.

Danger indeed, as we were both now too well aware, no longer making light of the canoeman's fears. We had enough occupation with our own then, and for nearly an hour after, all the while in dread of the canoe being capsized.

But it safely rode out the storm, which at length showed signs of abating; indeed, ceased almost as suddenly as it had risen. The wind went down, the rain stopped falling, the dark clouds forsook the firmament, showing a clear moon, whose light shimmered on the white cone of Popocatepec, which, like an immense sugar-loaf, stood outlined against the blue background of sky.

CHAPTER XIII.

"LOS BANDOLEROS!"

"THANK Heaven! we've escaped that little bit of a bother—danger, too, from what you tell me. But who'd have thought of such a thing? One's life risked by shipwreck in a swamp—a ditch of water not six yards wide! Ha! ha! ha!"

It was Crittenden who spoke and laughed; nor could I help joining him in the laugh, the whole thing seeming so ludicrous—in retrospect. For our troubles were now over, with all perils—as we supposed—and it only remained to proceed on to San Isidro, and thence to the city. True, it would be broad daylight, and possibly two hours after, ere we should reach our destination. But, what of that? My comrade had already resigned himself to the awkwardness of being absent without leave. The delightful sensation of having escaped real danger made all else serene; hence our mirthful mood.

It did not last for long. While we were yet in the act of congratulating ourselves, I noticed that our canoeman's features still wore a troubled look. As the moon was shining full upon his face of bronze I easily observed this. He had again got his craft in motion, and was plying his two-bladed oar; but neither vigorously, nor with his accustomed rapidity of stroke. Instead, his arms moved languidly, now and then holding the paddle suspended; while his eyes seemed alternately to interrogate the water ahead, and the sedge on each side of it?

"What is it, Pepito?" I asked. "Not any new danger, I hope."

"I hope so, too, s'ñor. But I have my fears."

"Fears of what? Surely the storm is over now?"

"The storm, yes. But not what may come after."

"You don't mean the men in the boats?"

"Oh no! s'ñor. There's not much fear of our having been followed by them. They'd have enough on their hands to look after themselves. Bad as they might be, what I'm thinking of would be worse."

"And what are you thinking of?"

"*Los bandoleros!*"

"Robbers! Why that's just what we were supposing them in the boats to be!"

"Ah! it isn't that sort I mean. The *bandoleros* I'm speaking of are not the gentlemen of the road, called *salteadores*. Far more dangerous than them, for the *salteadores*, when they capture a poor fellow, will let them go again; that is if they find he hasn't anything on him worth taking. And a rich one they'll let off, too, most times, after stripping him. But the *bandoleros* of the Lakes, they that waylay us Indians who traverse the *acalotés*—from them escape isn't so easy. Ah! impossible if one be beset on both sides by them. Then it's certain death. And a horrible death, too; for it don't come at once, but after days of suffering, by inches! *Ay Dios!* it must be torture to any one who has the ill-luck to find a *bandolero* both before and behind. I knew one who did—a pescador, belonging to our people. He was found in his periagua a complete skeleton. For the *zopilotes* had picked all the flesh off his bones, and very likely had begun that before the breath was out of his body. Oh, *Virgen Santissima!* forbid that we should have such a fate!"

My comrade and I could join in the petition, without comprehending how this horrible fate prayed against was brought about. I had just a glimmer of what the man meant, and was about to demand fuller explanation, when, all at once, he bent himself more earnestly to his paddle, saying:

"If there's a *bandolero* ahead, the sooner we know it the better, lest there be another behind. After such a *huracana* something's sure to have gone adrift."

Seeing him so actively engaged, with his attention fully occupied, we forbore for the time further questioning him, and the canoe glided swiftly onward. But soon he commenced slowing again, as he did so, the anxious expression upon his features becoming deeper and more fixed.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he next exclaimed. "The *acaloté* grows narrower and narrower. *Mira, caballeros!*"

It did not need his pointing this out to us. We had already been regarding the list of water, shining under the moon like a silver ribbon, and noticed that ahead it appeared to be of less width, and further on narrowing to a point!

We were in hopes it might be an ocular deception, caused by our viewing it from a distance. But no. A few more strokes of the paddle brought us near enough to see that the open water ended in an acute angle, and soon after the sedge brushed our beam-ends on both sides!

The canoe was pressed up between the yielding banks till it stuck fast. Then the Indian, standing erect in it, and looking over the tops of the reeds, after an instant cried out:

"*Carrai!* Just as I feared. A *bandolero* it is, and the *acaloté* closed up!"

We understood him now, too well. The storm had torn off a portion of the floating quagmire, which, drifting across the list of open water, had brought its opposite edges together, uniting them as though they had never been apart.

Had Crittenden and I been by ourselves, we might have stayed longer there, to look further to see if there were no crack or cranny through which the canoe could be squeezed. Not so he who had charge of it. Better acquainted with the nature of the change that had taken place, almost on the instant of pronouncing the *acaloté* closed, he set the blade of his paddle against the sedge, and commenced pushing the craft backward, with all the strength of his arms. Soon as getting into open water again, we were made aware of his reason for this, by hearing him say in a tone of undiminished apprehension:

"It'll be one of the grand *bandoleros*, and's gone in behind, then only the Virgin can save us!"

By this we had both become anxious as he; indeed equally apprehensive of danger. His wild words, with his excited air and actions, were well calculated to alarm us.

But there was something besides, still further to intensify our fears; a thing of our own observation. As we repassed the place, where we had lain to during the storm, we fancied the open water was there of less width than when we left it.

It was no fancy, as we had soon reason to know. For, continuing on in the backward direction, before we had gone quite three hundred yards, our eyes were greeted by a spectacle, similar to and cheerless as that they had turned away from—a long, thin strip of moonlit water, in the distance narrowing to a thread! As the bulrushes bending over once more brushed against our cheeks, the Indian cried out:

"*Dios Santos!* the *acaloté*'s blocked at both ends! It's all over with us now!"

And ceasing to use his paddle, he sat still, as if either resigned to the inevitable, or paralyzed by despair!

That we were in real danger now—even unto death—there was not the shadow of a doubt; though as yet neither I nor my comrade could fully realize it. Not but that the behavior of our canoeman furnished us with sufficient reason. He remained seated on the thwart, though

not all the while silent; instead, every now and then, uttering pious ejaculations and muttering stiches of prayer; the patronizers taught him, ready on the lip of every Mexican Indian.

It was as much as we could do to get him roused from his stupor, and induced to resume his paddle. We succeeded, however; and compelling him to pull back along the acalote, we examined it more minutely, at both ends and along both edges, but without finding any passage leading out. It seemed to be yet growing narrower; but there was nothing in that to make us further afraid. With the canoe high and dry upon the sedge, we would be no worse off than in the silt of water now left us.

To push it through the close-growing plants was a thing plainly impracticable. The Indian said so; but we could see it for ourselves, and did not think of making the attempt. No more thought we of abandoning the now useless craft, and taking to the cinta itself. We could not pass over it either by swimming or crawling. To set foot upon it would be to break through and go to the bottom, with little chance of coming up again. Never was quagmire more provoking; too thin to bear our weight, and yet with a growth of reeds too thick for either boat or man to make way among them.

Several times we rose to our feet, and standing tip-toe made survey on every side. Not a flock of open water to be seen anywhere; nothing but reeds and rushes, silver-gray under the weird moonbeams. True, there were the mountains, Popocatepec and the White Sister on the east, with the dark Ajusco frowning at us from the opposite side; and we could also distinguish numerous isolated summits, standing solitary here and there. Near they looked in the moonlight, nor were they so very far off; but too far for us, as we saw them then.

We could not have been much worse off cast away on a desert isle. Perhaps better, with a boat at our service, however small or frail; for with it there would still be some chance to reach land. As it was, there seemed none here, as our canoe, a Job's comforter, once more getting his tongue untied, kept assuring us. Over and over again he repeated the tale of the pescador turned to a skeleton, with other like legends of the Lakes. The man seemed to be wandering in his mind, and we took no more notice, either of himself or his narrations.

Oh! it was terribly tantalizing. Land not only in sight, but the resemblance of it so close that we could touch it with our outstretched hands; grasp the things that grew on it. And yet know ourselves to be as far from the real *terra firma*, as though the craft which carried us, lying quiet in the now still water, were tossing about on the waves of mid-ocean!

CHAPTER XIV.

A SWEET RESPONSE.

IN all the record of a somewhat eventful life, I cannot remember having passed a more miserable night than this in the Laguna de Chalco. I had been lost upon the prairies of the North, half famished with hunger and almost dying of thirst; in imminent danger of having my scalp "raised" by red-skins; had lain all night upon the battle-field, with scarce a drop of blood in my body, but a wound which had depleted me, I believed to be mortal; had twice suffered shipwreck, to escape upon a raft. But to all these incidents I can look back lightly, cheerfully, compared with my remembrance of that night of misery spent in the middle of a swamp; for a most wretched one it was. True, I had a companion to share it with me, if that were any consolation; but, although imperiled as myself, I do not believe he more than half comprehended the danger. The lieutenant of dragoons was a good, jovial fellow, but not overburdened with brains, and I could not convince him how critical our situation was. To make him acquainted with the nature of the quagmire around us—what I had read and been told about it—would have been a difficult task, if not impossible. He had laughed at the canoe-man's account of it, treating the whole thing as a joke; or, at all events, an exaggeration, due to the young fellow's fears. I knew it was not, knew it but too well; and, so enlightened, felt correspondingly sad. Not strange, with such a prospect before us—a fate possibly the same as befell the fisherman. In the midst of a dismal marsh, imprisoned as securely as within the walls of a dungeon, to pass days and nights in wearisome existence; tortured by hunger—thirst we need not fear—and then, last and worst horror of all, the zopilotes (black vultures), seen soaring above, on shadowy wings, with necks outstretched and blood-stained beaks, threatening to swoop down upon us—we too weak to fight them off!

Such was the picture all that night passing before my mental vision—not in dreams, for I slept not, but in fancy, too likely to become real.

There was something besides; another baneful thought to harass, making my cup of misery brimful. For, despite my own immediate danger, I could not help dwelling on that which might at the same moment be besetting the Indian girl; regretting that I had parted from

her at all—that I had not stayed and taken our chances with the men in the boats, whoever they might be.

"Would that we were back there now!" was a wish that more than once I gave expression to, my comrade as oft responding to it. What a pity we did not wait their coming up, and try the effect of our six-shooters on them! The sequence could not have been more serious.

As the shipwrecked sailor, who, all night clinging to spar or royal mast still above the waves, watches for the morning's light, so watched we. To see it come at last, but along with it no sight, sound, or sign to give us hope of deliverance. Instead, something to make us more despairing. All night we had heard the cry of the quay-bird—bittern of the western world—whose shrill, lugubrious note seemed the foreteller of death. Now in the morning, with the sunrise that should have been cheerful, our ears were saluted by sounds proclaiming death near at hand—the hoarse croak of the turkey vulture, and the shriller squeal of the harpy eagle. Birds of both these species had sighted us, with a seeming knowledge we must soon become their victims!

Again we stood upright, and gazed over the cinta, on all sides, round and round. If weird and woe-inspiring under the moon's light, it seemed not a whit more cheerful with the sun shining upon it. Indeed less; for now we saw more distinctly the vast wilderness of green stretching afar, till it met the bases of the brown rugged mountains, and could better comprehend the hopelessness of our situation. The nearest dry land was miles distant, though had it been but a furlong, the impossibility of reaching it would have been the same.

We had nevertheless a return of hope, which came with the daylight, as such ever does, even to those lying on a death-bed. And while it continued we were neither silent nor inactive; instead, shouting loudly, and at intervals firing shots from our pistols—signals of distress. There was some chance they might be heard, but not much of their being understood. More likely would they be mistaken for a fusillade of fowlers' guns, making havoc among the *anadides* of the lake. However, we kept up the shooting until our last cartridge was spent, and the shouting till we were hoarse. Neither brought response.

As a *dernier ressort* we rigged up a pole, which chanced to be in the canoe, with our handkerchiefs on its top, extended upon a cross-piece we had attached to it. This done, we desisted from all further action—less to await the result, for we scarce looked for any, than because we could do no more.

In all this the Indian gave us not the slightest assistance, nor seemed to take any interest in our efforts. Possibly he supposed them to be idle, and with the characteristic apathy of his race, and its faith in fatalism, believed his time come. Whatever the reason, there sat he in sullen resignation, a very picture of despair, aught but a cheerful fellow-traveler on the journey of death!

And on such both my comrade and I now believed ourselves launched, irrevocably and without return. For Crittenden had at length, and long ere this, become convinced of the danger. He could not avoid it. Doomed to a certainty, if no help came from without, and we had as good as given up all hope of that.

So we sat, by the side of death, as it were—a death painful as sure, with life-long lingering; an end horrible to think of. We did think of it, nevertheless. How could we help, since it was staring us in the face?—waiting for us!

Little conversation was carried on now. All had been said that needed saying, and our thoughts were mutually understood without the necessity of exchanging speech. They were very similar, their subject being the same—the gloomy fate before us. Dejected and sick at heart, we passed the long hours of that day; no living thing seen save the birds of ill-omen above, and nothing heard but their cries, alike foreboding evil. And on through the yet more irksome hours of another night; listening to the dismal cry of the great swamp owl, the vengeful-like screech of the *gruya* crane, and the wailing notes of the whippoorwill. It needed no such concert to make us melancholy; we had cause enough without it.

And yet when morning again broke over us, and we once more looked upon the snowy summits of the two great mountains, rose-tinted by the rays of the ascending sun, the sight so beautiful inspired us with fresh hopes; or, at least, a desire to live.

Stimulated by this, we again raised our voices, exhorting them to the utmost. We shouted in turns, loudly calling, and in tones of appeal not to be mistaken; in the intervals listening intently.

A human voice at last—a shout—a responsive hail! Thank the Heavenly and merciful Father! No pen could paint, or tongue tell, the thrill of joy that ran through us on hearing that hail. It might be likened to the cry "Reprieved!" sent over the heads of spectators, to the ears of a condemned man standing on the scaffold.

The shout so sweet to our ears was repeated; for we had hailed in response. And then we heard several voices calling in chorus; one of which our canoe-man recognized. For he also was now roused from his apathy, and was himself again.

"Praise to the Virgin! Glory to the good Santa Mercedes!" he exclaimed, starting up and flinging his arms excitedly around. "You hear, caballeros? It's the Señor Don Tito who calls!"

Don Tito it surely was—his presence there soon after explained by himself. He had not come by chance or accident, but, carrying out a purpose, in which he had now succeeded, since it was neither more nor less than to search for ourselves. How he should know we were lost, scarce needs to be told. Simply, by the canoe-man not returning to the chinampas in due time. The good alcalde suspecting something amiss, had sent his own son—meanwhile returned home—to San Isidro, to inquire whether we had reached that place in safety. Taking the more direct route—the acalote leading to the left—the youth arrived at San Isidro, to find from his father's friend, that we had not been for the horses which were to have been furnished us. Speeding back to the chinampas with this intelligence, it was there surmised that we had met with the mischance, which had actually befallen us. The violent storm coming suddenly on just after we had started, led Don Tito to believe that we were beset by bandoleros of a different sort to those from whom we had fled. So, summoning together a score of his people, with their boats, and placing himself at their head, the worthy alcalde had set out to look for us. He knew the route we were to have taken, and found the acalote closed up. But, by good fortune, only for a hundred yards or so at that end; and with their broad blades, like hay-knives—used for cutting the cinta—the chinamperos soon hewed out a track for the canoe, so freeing us from our "fix."

The storm had done damage to the floating gardens; some of them having broken loose from their moorings, and drifted out into the open water. They too had been visited by *bandoleros*, real robbers of the road, as Don Tito had now no doubt they were. They had, as I supposed, made direct for the chinampa of the alcalde; but to find it deserted and the choza empty. Apprehending their character, before they could make landing, he had availed himself of the means of safety hinted at, and taken to the cinta, to return home after the intruders had gone off again. This they had done, soon as the storm permitted, its violence having affected them too. Disappointed in not finding their intended victims—my comrade and myself, as we supposed—they had rowed away without committing any outrage on the water-dwellers.

All this we learnt from Don Tito while being released from our prison in the sedge. For we did not return with him to the chinampas. He proposed our doing so, offering to send us back to the city in one of his boats, by the main canal—a proposal we declined for good reasons. The bandits might still be at Tlalhuac, and our revolvers were empty, with nothing to reload them. It was a bit of good luck, our having brought these weapons with us. The sham fisherman had seen them upon our persons; and to that we were no doubt indebted for our lives—the dread which the repeating pistol inspires among all Mexicans, robbers not excepted, having saved us from being attacked as we passed Tlalhuac. The bandits had thought better of it, and changing their plan, designed assailing us by surprise and under the shadows of night.

Don Tito, yielding to our wishes, permitted us to choose the San Isidro route, and sending his son along, we had the horses as originally intended.

In fine, we arrived safe at our respective quarters—I for one determined never again to trust myself so far afield, without being accompanied by a few files of escort.

CHAPTER XV.

AN INVITATION FOR CHRISTMAS EVE.

THERE were now three men in or about the Mexican capital, any one of whom I would have given something to set eyes on, and a good deal to get them all under my glance.

I need scarce say who they were: the reader will recognize them as the thief who stole Captain Moreno's watch, the boatman who betrayed us, and that elegant gentleman, "El Guapo."

I name them, not according to the order in which I was desirous of meeting them, but reversely. As already said, seeing the first would have been of little service to me, unless some lucky chance enabled me to identify him. Besides, my affair with him was only a matter of lost money, for which I had got in exchange the warm friendship of a worthy man; some compensation certainly. As for the second, I should know him at sight; and was determined, if I ever had this advantage, to make him suffer for the series of tricks he had played me. I had no doubt of what his intention had been: to have me waylaid at Tlalhuac, or somewhere else upon the canal. But his motive was not so clear. Could it be that my behavior to him at the close of our first interview—that rebuke

with the opprobrious epithet bestowed—had gained me his deadly hostility, and for that he harbored revenge! I have known cases of the kind among Mexicans of his class, who are very Corsicans in their ideas of the vendetta. Still, such a motive was hardly sufficient to account for so much maneuvering, with the pains it must have cost him to get me into his power. More like, the men he was acting with were robbers, himself one, who designed getting hold of my person in order to demand ransom. If so, or indeed in any case, I was not likely to see him again either; nor ever more be mysteriously reminded of having done him a service.

Of all three I wanted most to be face to face with the Señor Don Hilario, or anywhere within hailing distance of him. So long as he was at large I trembled for the safety of the Indian girl. For if, as Espinosa had hinted, he was chief of a robber band, he could reach her almost anywhere. It did not escape me to think that his might be the very men whom we had seen at Tlalhuac, and who followed us to the chinampas, he leading and the other guiding them. For the two were ever associated in my thoughts, from their being near one another when I first saw them. The only reason for my not supposing them friends was their apparent disparity of rank. But as robbers that would count for nothing; and the ragged fellow might be in disguise, as the dandy was while counterfeiting a Red Hat. That the pelado could play parts, too, I had now reason to know. Certain he was no fisherman, or he would better have known how to row a boat.

And yet there were reasons against my believing our intended assailants to have the Señor Don Hilario at their head. If so, why had he not long ere then renewed the attempt I had frustrated by pitching him into the canal? And with almost a certainty of success?

But *was* there such a certainty? It might be not. I recalled the confidence with which Don Tito had spoken, when telling me of his means of escape in case of any outrage being apprehended. And he proved it well founded. Quite likely the Indian alcalde, knowing the disturbed state of the country, and aware that the treasure that he possessed in his beautiful daughter—though he could scarce know that so well as I—had taken precautions for her safety, as his own. His not permitting the girl to go any more to the city was some evidence of this; and to believe it true was to me a tranquilizing thought, doing much to allay my anxiety on her account.

It even reconciled me to not seeing her any more alongside the Paseo de las Vigas. With the danger that I now knew threatened her, I was better pleased to think she stayed at home, trusting that time would bring about an opportunity of my meeting her again.

Time did not give me this with any of the three individuals I was so desirous to see. Days passed, and though in every walk I took through the streets or on the Alameda, every ride in either of the two Paseos, or at the head of my troop, every visit I paid to *café*, *restaurant*, market-place, Plaza de Toros, or theater, I had my eyes on the alert, interrogating every chink and corner, no more could I get them on any one of the trio I was so zealously searching for.

Thus disappointed, I came at length to the conclusion, that two of them at least were no longer in the city, and one, if not both, to be found should be looked for among the mountain passes—by the Pyramids of San Juan de Teotihuacan.

During all this time I was in contact, even daily communication, with him whose acquaintance I had made under such singular circumstances. Captain Moreno and I had in truth become friends, firmly and warmly attached to one another, notwithstanding the gulf of national enmity which, as might be supposed, would have kept us apart. Scarce a day passed that we did not meet elsewhere; he either visiting me at my quarters, or I him at his rooms—furnished apartments, of a superior style to those of Colonel Espinosa. For Moreno belonged to the *familias principales*—his father being a rich hacendado of the *tierra adentro*—and was but little dependent on his soldier's pay; so little, that the withholding it had not driven him into lodgings on the *entresuelo*.

We often again supped and dined at the Espiritu Santo, and most as often jested and laughed over the old incident which had been the means of bringing us together. Long ere this my expenditure on our first supper was repaid me in kind, and far more. For the young Mexican, besides being a man of means, was generous as rich, and would insist upon paying for everything. He borrowed no doubloons from me as his brother officer, Espinosa, had done, without repaying them. But I knew the lancer colonel could not help it; he being always hard up for the needful—bare and naked as the blade of his lance. So he jestingly used to say of him—

Things had been going on in this way for some time, when, one morning, Moreno met me counteracting along the Calle de Plateros. I had lately taken more to the "Street of the Silver-

smiths," less frequenting the Paseo de las Vigas, for reasons easily guessed.

Approaching me with a mysterious air, and manner somewhat ceremonial, he said:

"*Amigo mio!* Do you know that next week will commence the *Pascuas de Navidad?*"

"Of course I do, Captain Moreno. Strange if I didn't—I, native of a country where Christmas is kept with all its observances. But why do you remind me of its advent?"

"Only to ask if you have any engagement for the *Noche Buena?*"

I quite understood what he meant by the "*Noche Buena*," that being the Spanish synonym for Christmas Eve.

"It's on Thursday next," he added, while I was reflecting on what reply to make, and whether my engagements included the night preceding Christmas. "I hope you haven't."

"No," I said, in rejoinder; "not any for that night, I believe."

"Then may I ask you to spend it with me?"

"I shall do that with the greatest pleasure. But where? At your rooms, or in the Espiritu Santo?"

"At neither; nor anywhere in the city. I want you to go with me to the country, and enjoy a real *dia de campo*; see our country people and their sports—which you will where I intend taking you."

"Nothing would more delight me."

I but spoke the truth. Though conquerors of Mexico, and holding possession of the capital, we were yet outsiders to its social life—especially that more distinctly national, whose *costumbres* can only be studied in the remote rural districts, where we dared not go, unless in disguise, to observe them.

"*Pues, señor,*" proceeded he, who was in the act of inviting me; "I think I can promise you an entertainment with something that may be novel to you. As you know, we Mexicans, being good Catholics, don't look upon Christmas in the same light as you *hereticos* of the North. That is, we don't regard it so much as a religious festival; though I suppose we spend it in a somewhat similar way. With us the "*Noche Buena*" is the great occasion. On that night, which includes the day as well, rich and poor do their very best to be happy, or at all events make believe it. Our ricos give grand entertainments—not dinners but suppers—a meal, *amigo mio*, I shall always regard with especial favor, since it was by a supper our friendship was cemented."

At this I interrupted him, to return the compliment. I could not have done less.

"And," he continued, "the poor, however poor they may be, contrive on that occasion to make a respectable appearance—dressing in their best, and setting dishes on their tables regardless of expense. If they don't taste meat throughout all the rest of the year, they must certainly have it at their *noche buena* supper. And to get it, they often pinch themselves for weeks before the *fiesta*, as well as after. But you shall see for yourself how we spend Christmas Eve, not among the poorer classes, but in the house of a rico, where I purpose introducing you."

"May I ask who the gentleman is?"

"Of course. It's my uncle. He's a hacendado, and the proprietor of an extensive *magueyal*; which I only wish were mine, as it brings him in some thousands a year, with scarce any more trouble than drawing money out of a bank. His hacienda—La Soledad—is some five or six leagues from the city, by the edge of Lake Chalco, near San Isidro. I'm glad you've consented to go with me; and hope you'll not withdraw your consent, when I tell you the invitation hasn't originated with myself."

"Ah! Have I the pleasure of knowing your uncle, then? His name?"

"Don Joaquin Covarubio."

"I have heard the name." I had, for it was that of one of the large landed proprietors in the valley. "But I can't remember ever having met Don Joaquin."

"No matter about him. It wasn't he who has made me his deputy in this matter."

"Who, then?"

"My cousins; two rather pretty muchachitas, who are very desirous of cultivating your acquaintance, and of whose beauty I want to have your opinion; knowing you to be something of a connoisseur in that line."

Strange, listening to all this, though anything but unpleasant. For I had heard a good deal of talk about the beauty of the Covarubio girls, and knew more than one of my brother officers who would have been glad of an introduction to them; gladder still to think they desired it.

Of course I felt correspondingly flattered, and said so, adding:

"As you know, Captain Moreno, I shall be only too pleased to make the acquaintance of any of your friends, whoever they may be."

"That's settled, then; and I shall call for you on Thursday morning. At what hour?"

"Choose your own time; any hour after morning parade. I shall stay in quarters till you come."

"*Bueno!* I'll be with you by eleven. We'll soon gallop down to La Soledad, in good time for the sports, which begin early in the after-

noon. My uncle intends to have a grand gathering, all the country people within miles; so you'll have an opportunity to study the *costumbres de Mexico*. And," he added, with a smile of peculiar significance, "possibly you may there see something that will please you better than all—meet somebody you'll think even prettier than my pretty cousins."

"Who?" I mechanically asked, with an eagerness he could not fail to observe. He had mentioned San Isidro. Besides, I well remembered what he had said about an uncle who lived by the lake; and with heart wildly heaving I awaited his answer, more than half aware what it would be. It was as I anticipated:

"*La Reina de los Lagos.*"

At which he again favored me with his peculiar smile.

"Oh!" I said, making an effort to conceal my emotion, unsuccessful though. "You mean the Indian girl who sells flowers in the San Domingo market?"

"I mean the Indian girl who sells flowers in the San Domingo market," was the response, in provoking imitation of my pseudo-innocent tone; "the same from whom a certain officer of Mounted Rifles has often purchased the choicest and costliest nosegays, and—"

"Nonsense!" I blurted out, interrupting him, as I felt the red rising to my cheeks.

"The same," he went on, without heeding me, "whose pretty floating flower-garden the said rifleman was so curious to inspect; and did inspect, though it came near costing him his life. Now, *amigo mio*, do you identify the individual?"

I stammered out some reply, I scarce remember what, only that it ended in a burst of laughter, in which we both took part.

"Now, Señor Capitan," he said, drawing our dialogue to a close, "I think I've secured you for the *Noche Buena*; doubly secured you, have I not?"

He had; and knew it, without my making answer.

CHAPTER XVI.

EN ROUTE FOR THE FIESTA.

On the Thursday morning, as appointed, Captain Moreno came to my quarters, mounted and ready for the road. He found me awaiting him, with Crittenden, who was to be of the party—the young Mexican having made my friend's acquaintance some time before, and invited him on his own account.

We were both in full uniform, booted and spurred. Our late experience in *ranchero* dress had given us a distaste for that sort of thing; so we determined to present ourselves at La Soledad in a costume we were more accustomed to, if it did not better become us. Moreover, to make sure against another scare from either robbers or guerilleros, I had detached a half-dozen files of men to accompany us as escort. This I could do at discretion, without need to trouble head-quarters about such a trifle; and it had all been already arranged with him who was our host by proxy.

"The more the merrier," he said, glancing at the escort, mounted, and paraded before us. "Your soldiers—what fine-looking fellows they are!—will greatly add to the interest of the gathering. I'm sure my uncle will be only too glad to give them entertainment, while the country folks will go crazy with delight, at this new element introduced into the arena of their sports. For I'm happy to tell you, caballero, there's no hostility now, as there was when you first made your appearance among us. You came as invaders and conquerors; which, as a matter of course, our people didn't much like. Now, they rather look upon you as protectors. And with reason, considering the way you've behaved, especially in ridding us of road gentlemen. Before your advent they made journeying around here rather a risky thing."

This was true enough, for we had been zealous in the pursuit of these Mexican brigands, and had succeeded in breaking up some of the bands, by the capture and execution of several of their noted leaders. Still there were others at large, and one whom I suspected of occasionally making his appearance in that part of the valley we were about to visit; so that taking an escort along with us was a precaution by no means unnecessary. Simple prudence called for it.

My brother officer and I expressed our gratification at hearing the Mexican so deliver himself; and everything settled, we sprang into our saddles, gave the word "March!" and were off.

Passing out through the "garita" of San Lazaro, we turned our faces eastward, along the great National Road which leads from the capital to the coast at Vera Cruz.

It was a lovely morning, the rule rather than the exception in this charming valley, where spring ever reigns. If there be an interregnum 'tis when summer assumes the scepter. Around us stretched the smiling plain, most of it in meadow, with here and there a maize field, bordered by rows of *magueys* set in quincunxes, these gigantic aloes forming the characteristic vegetation of the country. In front was the great salt Lake Tezoco, of itself a little sea, reflecting,

CHAPTER XVII.

STRANGELY INTERROGATED.

JUST as I had made the reflection as above—unspoken of course—a voice sounded in my ear, saying:

"*Amigo mio!* What are you dreaming about? A pretty captain of cavalry you, riding two hundred yards in rear of your troop! Where should we all be, if suddenly attacked by guerilleros, or even a partida of salteadores? My word, Capitán Maynard, I'm half ashamed of you, and disposed to think, after all, that you're not the smart soldier, ever on his guard, I've heard speak of."

It was Moreno who thus ironically addressed me; his chapter of interrogatories, with the remarks intermingled, terminating in a loud laugh.

Some excuse had he for all this. After the first brush of conversation at our setting out came to a close, I had let drop my bridle-rein and fallen to the rear, reflecting as above described. He had been ahead, with Crittenden and the escort, and halting till I got up, was again by my side.

His voice roused me from my reverie, with a quickness which, perhaps, that of no other man at the moment could have done. For among the rivals my imagination had been conjuring up he was the figure most conspicuous. And handsomer figure could not well be than that of Captain Rafael Moreno, with face and features to correspond; the man, as any one would have imagined, to captivate her heart. He, too, having had such opportunity! It was not in the nature of things to think he could all along have been blind to her beauty; or she to his graces, with high social position to back them. Her father might have for progenitor either prince or king; but his uncle was owner of the land, if such it could be called, on which this descendant of a royal race lived, an humble tiller of the unstable soil—a market gardener! In short, Captain Moreno would be, in the eyes of the Indian girl, as the son of an English squire in those of his cottager's daughter—dazzling, irresistible.

All this had been running through my mind, and more. I had often recalled his defense of the chinampera's character, when being aspersed by Colonel Espinosa, and well remembered the expression upon his features; one of pain certainly, and likely from the same cause which affected myself.

Then I thought of his words later spoken, when we met in the Calle de Plateros, and he gave me the invitation I so eagerly accepted—that little bit of badinage, at which we both laughed. Might it be that he had been only sounding me—the Queen of the Lakes more the subject of his thoughts than either of his cousins Covarubio? Whether or not, a suspicion of this was in mine, at that very moment.

Notwithstanding its innocence, I felt a little nettled by his railery; for I could not help the belief that he divined my thoughts, or at least suspected them. And they were too serious, if not too painful, to be made sport of under these circumstances. However, it would have been ill grace in me to have shown resentment, much more expressed it. So I but made some commonplace rejoinder, doing the best I could to laugh along with him—a sorry and rather unsuccessful effort.

He did not seem to notice my chagrin, but proceeded in the same light, jovial strain:

"By the way, caballero, you've not yet told me what you think of my cousins."

"Your cousins! Of whom are you speaking, Captain Moreno?"

"Why, the Señoritas Covarubio, of course."

"What could I think of them, never having seen them?"

"Oh! yes you have; both seen and spoken to them. And I'm told, though that's only hearsay, were very much pleased with them, especially Ignacia. She is rather pretty, I may admit, though I am her cousin. For all Marianita is the most admired. It may not be so much for her beauty, as from being a little bit of a coquette. But tell me frankly, caballero, which is your favorite?"

I was mystified beyond expression, and began to think the man had taken leave of his senses.

"Surely you are jesting with me, Captain Moreno?"

"No, indeed; I'm quite in earnest. But never mind; I won't press the point now. When you've seen a little more of the young ladies, then I'll expect you to favor me with your dictum. But see! yonder's our destination—the house with a dome and belfry, beyond the clump of sycamores. May I beg your permission to ride on ahead, as *avant courier*, to announce your coming? The La Soledad stables may need some clearing out, before they can take in the horses of your escort."

The permission was of course taken as granted; and he galloped off, leaving me in a very maze of bewilderment.

As we rode on, I cudgled my brains thinking when and where I could have seen the Señoritas Covarubio. Seen and spoken to them! More expressed a partiality for one of them. Ignacia! Never! If not making sport of me.

must be mad, or, at the least, strangely mistaken.

Stay! I had met several Mexican misses, with names unknown to me, on the Paseo and in the Alameda; had exchanged salutations with some, even speech, rather informally. Might the Covarubio girls have been among these? If so, the admiration story was a myth; for I could not recall having admired any of them, much less said so. Just possible—it occurred to me in conclusion—some other individual wearing the uniform of the Mounted Rifles has been making himself agreeable in that quarter, and for him, not me, was this invitation meant—to spend Christmas Eve at La Soledad!

Reflecting in this fashion, I began to fear I had "put my foot in it," or, at least, Captain Moreno had done this for me. If such a mistake really had been made, and it looked like enough, I would cut a sorry figure at the festivities, besides causing disappointment, and possibly a good deal of chagrin, either to Ignacia, or the more admired Marianita.

However, the fault was not mine, nor could it be so construed. Cousin Rafael would have to bear the blame, and make such excuses as he could to the disappointed damsels. Consoling myself with this thought, and another which gave me still greater comfort, I little regretted the blunder, if such it were, that was bringing me to the house of Don Joaquin Covarubio.

We were now close to it, and could see it was a massive, quadrangular structure of the Moorish style of architecture, flat-roofed, and parapetted all around with a wide entrance in front which led to an inner court. Alongside it, and partially detached, stood the *capilla*, or chapel, surmounted by a dome of glazed tilework; while in rear were the domestic offices, and still further aback a collection of *ranchitas*, where dwelt the peons and other employes of the establishment. From the fields around, growing *maqueys*, many of which we had passed by in approaching the place, it could be told that La Soledad was what Captain Moreno had said, a *maqueyal*. A large barn-like building at the back was unmistakably the *tinacal*, a place where, by the process of fermentation the sap of the gigantic aloe, called *tlachiqué*, is converted into the national beverage *pulqué*.

At a glance, taking in all this, our eyes returned to the ground in front of the dwelling, where we saw signs of festal preparation on an extensive scale. A grand structure of the canopy kind had been erected, its supporting posts festooned with evergreens and flowers! While around it were stalls, screened from the sun by *petates*, squares of palm, or bulrush matting on tripod stands, beneath which certain copper-skinned hucksters of trinkets, drinkables, and comestibles, had already laid out their lures.

It was yet too early for the sports, or the assembling of the people who were to take part in them; and through these temporary erections we rode on up to the house. There to see, standing in the open doorway, with head courteously uncovered to receive us, a stout elderly gentleman, whom I fancied I had seen before. I was sure of it, after glancing up to the *azotea*, where two pretty feminine faces appeared above the coping of the parapet, with a set of masculine features between them.

"Now, caballero!" called down Captain Moreno, laughing as he spoke, "do you still persist in saying you've never seen my cousins Covarubio? If so, let me have the pleasure of introducing them. This Marianita; this Ignacia, whom—well, I won't say what I have heard. Dismount, and make your way up here!"

All was explained now. It did not need climbing to the housetop to tell that the two pairs of dark eyes gazing down at me, were the same from which I had received glances of gratitude in the Teatro Nacional!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COVARUBIO GIRLS.

FROM the city to La Soledad being a matter of fifteen miles, our appetites were sharp enough when we reached the hacienda. But our host had providentially thought of this, and we found an elegant spread awaiting us in the *sala de comer*. Among the Mexicans there is no such meal as luncheon. The day commences with *desayuna*, which is simply a cup of coffee, more commonly chocolate, with a sweetcake or biscuit. This taken at an early hour, for the Mexicans are early risers—most of the ladies doing devotions in the church, with not unfrequently a little flirtation, between six and seven; then returning home, and going back to their beds, where they lie till nearly eleven. 'Tis at their second uprising that the real breakfast, *almuerzo*, is brought upon the table; this, as with the French, being a *déjeuner à la fourchette*, with various meats and wines—in reality more dinner than breakfast. The dinner, *comida*, a very elaborate affair, is late in the afternoon; but supper, *cena*, is not largely indulged in, save on extraordinary occasions, as was to be this of "Noche Buena."

The luncheon set before us was indeed the breakfast, deferred till our arrival, and all the members of the family met us at the table. They were not numerous; only Don Joaquin himself,

as from a vast mirror laid upon its back, the mountain ranges which rose beyond, these appearing part of its frame. Southward on this same cordillera of the Mexican Andes, known as the Sierra Madre, Ixticihuatl was conspicuous; *La mujer blanca* of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants—the "white woman" herself seen reclining upon her back, with knees slightly elevated, breasts protuberant, and head resting upon a pillow of snow. Still further south, and on the same ridge—separated from Ixticihuatl by a *col*—towered the loftier Popocatepec, "the mountain that smokes,"—its Aztec appellation telling it to have been an active volcano; which it still is, intermittently. Around the valley our eyes were carried from summit to summit, those behind our backs being in the western cordillera, which displays the solitary snow cone of Toluca; while on our right and left trended transverse sierras of lower elevation, though many of them high as Mont Blanc, uniting the two cordilleras, and so completing the periphery of this remarkable table-land. It would be difficult to imagine, much more look upon lovelier landscape than that we had before and around us; possessing every element of the beautiful and sublime, like some vast scenic picture, framed in rugged rock-work. A scene, too, teeming with interest to the historian; still more to the geologist, who at every step may discover traces of earthquake and volcanic action, all the forces of upheaval with the opposite and less rapid processes of erosion and denudation. As he rides across it, from east to west, or makes the traverse from north to south, he will not fail to note certain isolated eminences, less like hills than miniature mountains, rising directly up from the plain without any unevenness of ground around their bases. Some of these "cerros" are flat-topped, others conical, with a quaint resemblance to tea-cups turned bottom upward, many having an extinct crater either in their side or summit. Even in Lake Chalco itself, as already stated, two or three of these little volcanoes shoot up out of the swamp, their facades of dark lava and basalt in striking contrast with the rich verdure of the surrounding sedge.

In several scouting expeditions made through the Mexican Valley, while in the performance of my duty, I had ridden among and around these odd elevations, observing them with interested eyes. But on this particular morning, I neither looked at, nor thought of them. All my thoughts were given to the sort of people I should meet at La Soledad; but more than all—I may as well confess it—to one I had met before.

Would she be there? And would she be glad to see me? The former question included the latter, and I could not answer it. Moreno had said "possibly," without giving any reasons for his thinking it an uncertainty, and not on any account would I have asked him for them now. He seemed already to know enough, or too much, of my love affair; though how he had come by his knowledge I could not even guess. I had told no one of my inclinations in that quarter—not even Crittenden—and was rather congratulating myself on having kept them secret. As it appeared, I was mistaken, and so far as the satisfaction of secrecy went, had been but living in a fool's paradise.

If at the *fiesta*, how would the Queen of the Lakes comport herself? With dignity, I could tell; and of her grace there needed no guessing. I could fancy her there, queen of the land as the lakes. It was not of this however I was thinking, but her behavior in other respects. Was she likely to enact the rôle of coquette, and so justify Espinosa's insinuations? or would she be, as I had hitherto seen her, the personification of ingenuousness—of innocence—to all appearance good as she was beautiful?

As yet I had no jealousy. The pang I had experienced, listening to the innuendoes of the would-be go-between, and the talk of the lancer colonel—borne out by appearances, was not exactly of that kind. Besides, it had long since passed away, and I no longer dreaded having a robber for my rival. But there might be a rival for all that—some youth I had not yet seen, neither heard of. If so, I would surely see him at La Soledad—supposing her to be there. Who, and what like would he be? One of her own race? Absurd the question, as the thought! However pure the strain of blood from Aztec kings, and unchallenged the line of descent, there was none in the valley of Mexico—none living—fit mate for my queen. Sure was I of that.

Who, then, might be the besieger of her heart—if such there was? If such there was! What a ridiculous condition! There could be no doubt in this regard; for such there must be—not one, but many. A more rational question was, had any of them won it? And if so, who?

I could fancy her at this *fiesta* beset, surrounded by flatterers, admirers. Such a spectacle I should be sure to see, still supposing her there. But, how could I believe that up to that hour—she was woman grown, if not of woman's age—she had resisted such a battery of assaults?

A miracle if she had, and the greater the triumph the sweeter to possess her!

his two daughters, and the youth, their brother, with the *capellan*—a priest, who administered to the spiritual wants of the *maguoyal*, his chapel being that already spoken of as attached to the dwelling. Then there was cousin Rafael, Crittenden, and myself.

It was but natural our conversation should turn upon the episode in the theater, and that this would be almost the first topic taken up. Which it was; the younger of the two girls, Marianita, beginning it.

"What will they do to him, señor?" she said, addressing herself to me. "I hope the poor fellow won't be too severely punished."

"Poor fellow, indeed!" cried Captain Moreno, who had overheard the question and remark. "A strange way to speak of a man who behaved himself so badly. I hope they'll punish him with all severity."

"Cruel!" exclaimed she whom Moreno had pronounced a little bit of a coquette. "And, after all, what did he do?"

"Tried to kiss you, and you only," answered the cousin, in a tone of playful sarcasm, adding: "I suppose that's why you wish his punishment to be light."

This was a home-thrust; for in point of fact it was the younger of the sisters Sullivan was doing his best to get hold of, when I entered the box. I could remember it by the other—who was much the taller—having been to all appearance unmolested.

The rejoinder cousin Rafael received, was a crumb of biscuit flung across the table at him, with the words:

"That for your impertinence, sir!"

This called forth a general laugh; in which, soon regaining her temper—for her eyes had flashed angrily—the young lady herself joined.

"Well," she said, braving it out; "you know the man was *embriaguado*."

"Which means, I presume, that if he hadn't been intoxicated, he wouldn't have cared to kiss you."

This time Captain Moreno, for it was he again who spoke, had an orange sent full in his face, and with a force that made him wince!

It was a good shot, and well deserved, as all laughingly said—all save Doña Ignacia.

She instead only smiled, without speaking, and it occurred to me that she felt something more than ordinary sympathy for her cousin, so neatly discomfited. In this conjecture I was wide away from the mark, as I afterward came to know.

What was thus taking place at the luncheon table might seem somewhat *bizarre*. But be it remembered, that it was Christmas Eve, when in Mexico everything is allowed—even in the best society, as this undoubtedly was. The flinging of the orange, however, while raising the merriment to its highest, brought the gay bantering to an end; Don Joaquin himself, now more seriously asking, what had been done to the officer arrested.

"Nothing as yet," I said in answer. "He is to be tried by court-martial, and in all likelihood will be condemned, and dismissed the service."

Though in no way connected with my story, I may be pardoned for digressing to tell what afterward became of this unfortunate man. For, bad as he might be, his fate was sad and bitter—even beyond deserving.

It turned out as I had predicted. He got cashiered; the commission which he had won by distinguished services, and held but a brief period, was taken from him; his shoulder-straps torn off, and himself sent adrift, to go whithersoever it might please him, but with the brand of infamy on his name.

Disgraced, shunned by his old comrades—even those in the ranks, by whose side he had shouldered the musket—who could blame him for fleeing their presence and going over to the enemy? Which he did, betaking himself to San Queretaro, where, as already said, the Mexicans still kept up a form of government, with the skeleton of an army. Making offer of his tarnished sword, it was not only accepted, but himself promoted to a far higher rank than he had held in the army he involuntarily abandoned. In short, he was made a colonel, *punctum* on the spot, and given the command of a regiment!

But again his evil star was over him, and his good fortune, as before, of short continuance. For soon after was signed the treaty—known as that of Guadalupe, from the town in which the commission met—restoring peace between the contending armies, and we, the invaders, evacuated the country.

Scarce were we out of it, when one of its "peculiar institutions" displayed itself, in the shape of a *grito*, or *pronunciamiento*, as Mexican revolutions are indifferently called. This one was got up by the famed guerrilla chief, a Spaniard and priest known as the "Padre Jarauta," Sullivan taking sides with him. It was against the then lawfully constituted government of the country, which was far from being firmly established. It proved strong enough, however, to withstand the attack of the partisan priest; who, defeated and taken prisoner, was, with scarce the form or ceremony of trial, *pasado por las armas*—in plain English, shot. And along with him retired lieutenant, but unfortunately for himself, act

To return to the gay and happy circle, for the time so unceremoniously forsaken.

"I shall be glad to hear of the gentleman getting his deserts." This said by Captain Moreno. "And plenty of punishment, too," he continued. "If they let him off without any, I shall have something to say to him myself."

At which implied threat, she who came so near being kissed against her will, and had so late thrown the orange at her cousin's head, now looked apprehensively, appealingly in his face, as much as to say:

"Oh, dear Rafael, don't! you mustn't think of calling him out. You must not, indeed!"

So I interpreted the expression on her features, which surprised as much as it puzzled me. Had it been upon the face of her sister, I could have better understood it. But Doña Ignacia looked calm, almost unconcerned; while the eyes of the other, after first showing anxiety, seemed to sparkle with pride, as she kept them fixed on him who was ready to dare death for her sake.

I was not long at that luncheon table before discovering that the bits of biscuit and oranges flung across it were but as shafts sent from Cupid's bow, when the love-god is playing the game of cross-purposes. It became clear to me that I had made a mistake, and what I had taken for hostility was but the "fond rage" oft "blighting the life's bloom" of lovers. It was not likely, however, to do that with Captain Rafael Moreno, and Marianita Covarubio. From the glances I saw, every now and then, at the very shortest intervals, exchanged between them, I came to the conclusion they would ere long stand to each other in a relationship closer than cousins. A remark he had made during our morning's ride helped me to this: "Marianita is the most admired." He may have most admired her; but for myself I could not help thinking, interrogatively: "Where are his eyes?"

Another thought, pleasanter and more satisfactory, came from the discovery I had made. A man cannot well be in love with two women at the same time. Vanity, or wickedness, may stir him to make such pretense. But I knew that Rafael Moreno was neither vain nor wicked, and this convinced me I had made still another mistake in my suspicion of his having an eye for the Indian girl. Need I add how much it rejoiced me to think so?

Before we left the table I observed the promise of another "affinity;" at least I saw a man in the act of falling in love. Crittenden was evidently smitten with the older sister; his eyes repeatedly, though stealthily, turning toward her. So much seemed he affected, as to have his appetite spoiled for the repast. Scarce tasted he of the delicious dishes set before him, and I knew my brother officer was aught but an anchorite.

I was curious to discover whether his new-sprung passion was likely to be reciprocated. Quite probable that it would, if Doña Ignacia's affections were not pre-engaged. For I was well aware that the dark-eyed *doncellas* of Mexico have a partiality for "Los Gueros"—as men of blonde complexion are called—and the fiery face and fox-colored hair of the great dragon would be no bar to his finding favor in the eyes of even that stately beauty.

Certainly she seemed not displeased at the glances of admiration given her, which she could not help noticing.

"Now, amigo mio," said Don Rafael, drawing me aside after the ladies had left the luncheon-table. "According to promise, I call for your opinion. What think you of my cousins? Are they not *muy lindas*?"

"*Lindissimas*! Very lovely, indeed, both of them."

"And which do you consider the prettier?"

"I know which you consider so."

"Ignacia?"

"No; the future Señora Moreno."

"Oh, nonsense!" he rejoined, with a laugh, looking a little sheepish. "Come along!" he added, not caring to question me further; "let us out, and see the sports. By this they'll be beginning."

CHAPTER XIX.

A MEXICAN FÊTE-CHAMPETRE.

IN no part of the world are there more days devoted to merry-making than in Mexico. Every week has its *fiesta*, either religious or simply for amusement, though in all there is much of the latter. And among the people on such occasions assembled, no country can show a finer or more varied display of dresses.

When, chaperoned by Captain Moreno, I returned to the front of the house, the sight which met my eye was one worth looking at, and not likely to be forgotten. During the hour we had been at luncheon, the festival people had been arriving in flocks; and now the green meadow, in which the canopy stood, was well covered with them, standing in groups or promenading to and fro. There was the *ranchero* in all the pride and pomp of his superb costume, tight-fitting *jaqueta*, *calzoneras*, *calzoncillos*, sash of silk crape, *botas* and *sombrero*, the hat heavily banded with gold or silver bullion, the boots

having spurs on them with rowels inches in diameter! The *arriero*, too, not in his everyday wear of thick doublet and leathern apron, as when managing his mules; but in a gala suit, gaudy in hue and rich in quality as that of the *ranchero*, but of a quite different cut and pattern. *Mestizos* from the towns and villages also wore the wide velveteen trowsers, buttoned along the outer seams from hip to ankle; coatless and jacketless, but with finest linen shirts elaborately stitched about the breast—the universal *serapé* hanging folded over their left shoulders. A sprinkling of town dwellers of a lower class, and less respectable character, also formed part of the concourse—the so-called *leperos* and *pelados* distinguished by a cheaper kind of wrap worn over their shirts of coarse cotton stuff.

Last of the *gente de razon*—as all Mexicans with white blood in their veins are indifferently designated—were the *hacendados*, or landed gentry of the neighborhood, who, though of highest rank, were the least conspicuous of any as regarded dress—most of the gentlemen appearing in roundabout jackets of somber broadcloth, or frock coats of the same, and trowsers—some in the latest Paris fashion, wearing patent leather boots, and the orthodox silk "tile."

The feminine portion of the assemblage did not show such a great variety of dress, though several styles were observable. And in this, as with the men, the *muchachas* of the middle, and even lower ranks, had the advantage of the ladies of the *élite*; their short-skirted, bright-banded petticoats, with the embroidered but sleeveless chemise and the stockingless ankles ending in small satin slippers, gave them an opportunity of displaying their charms, denied to the grand dames, who had adopted the fashions of Europe. But even among these the hideous bonnet was nowhere to be seen. Most of them wore a silken *chale*, drawn over their heads instead of resting upon their shoulders; while not a few appeared in that most becoming of costumes—the *mantilla*—with tortoise-shell comb set high on the crown, and black lace veil drooping aback from it.

None of these styles of apparel were new to me, though it was not on this account I regarded them with but a careless glance. For there was yet another sort of garb upon the ground, I was more desirous of observing; the badge of a different race of people—the conquered one—the *gente sin razon*, as the Indians are sometimes contemptuously called. Nor was there any lack of its representatives there, but hundreds of them, who, as a rule, kept apart from the descendants of the conquerors—whether these were of pure blood, or a blending with their own.

Nothing could be simpler, or with less pretension to picturesqueness, than the ordinary wear of the Mexican Indian—that is, of the men—differing but little from that worn by their ancestors when their country was called Anahuac. A coat without sleeves—the *tilma*—in shape a sack, with a hole in the bottom, through which the head is passed and another on each side to let out the arms. This, with a pair of wide, short-legged drawers of coarse calico, or tanned sheep-skin, a hat of straw plait upon the head, and a pair of rude sandals, *guaraches*, on the feet, and you have the modern Aztec Indian of the masculine gender.

Nor is his mate much more elegantly attired, when in her ordinary everyday dress. A coarse woolen petticoat, the material home-spun, home-woven, and dyed at home, almost universally dark blue, with a white cotton chemise, and sometimes a gray scarf of the *reboso* kind, the cheapest and commonest; these constitute the sole wardrobe of the Mexican Indian woman. If she wear head-dress at all, it will be a hat of precisely the same pattern as that worn by her husband. But, as a rule, she goes bareheaded, her long black tresses done up in two distinct plaits, hanging down her back, and never without a piece of bright red ribbon, twisted into their ends.

To this plainness of attire, however, there are exceptions. For among the Mexican Indians there are ranks and classes, just as with the so-called superior race—a "nobility and gentry," with privileges acknowledged, and as well understood by their own people, as they would be by the people of England, had they a place in the books of Sir Bernard Burke. It is among this class, that the pretty Indian maidens, oft mentioned by travelers, are to be found. And with these the costume, though still marked by simplicity, is both graceful and becoming. They have in part adopted the dress of their white sisters—chiefly those of the specialty *poblana*—wearing the banded petticoat and embroidered chemisette. But, in addition, a cloak-like garment, the *huipile*, loosely and gracefully draped, gives character to their dress; as does also a white kerchief covering the crown of the head, with ends falling down behind.

And for one, who if there, would in all likelihood be appareled somewhat after this fashion, I was looking.

A goodly number of the Indians present had come to make profit out of pleasure; and, seated under the *petate* screens, were bemoaning their wretched lot, and their wretched voices, proclaiming their

But there were at the fiesta others, only as sight-seers, in their grandest gala dresses; and it was through the ranks of these my eyes went and wandered.

All to no purpose. She I was seeking for seemed not to be there!

Just as I had completed my exploration, having gone all over the ground, the sports of the day commenced. They were of the usual kind, all strictly national, and comprised "tailing the bull," "running the cock," fighting chancicler as well, with feats of equitation. Some of these last were wonderful indeed, almost incredible. As for instance, the horseman, with his horse in full gallop, bending down and lifting a dollar piece from the ground; the coin to be kept as the reward of his adroitness.

As I had been witness to all of them before, I cared less for looking at them now. But I confess to another cause then depriving them of interest. This carried me once more over the field, my eyes searching everywhere—more especially scanning the groups of Indian girls, though not scrutinizing their faces. There was no need to do that. Had the one I was in quest of been there, it would have been conspicuous as the moon amid stars.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LATEST ARRIVAL.

IN my researches I was left to myself, my chaperon having forsaken me. He found metal more attractive in his cousin Marianita; and as the other affinity appeared to be progressing, I saw but little of Crittenden throughout the afternoon. So far as any flirtation, I was likely to be but a looker-on—rather an uninteresting part to play, at *fiesta*, or elsewhere. In short, my company seemed *de trop*, turn which way I would; and, as I had commenced the rôle of walking gentleman, I continued it—sauntering round and round.

A dull Christmas Eve it promised to be, for me at all events; and this after looking forward to something so different! Nor could I anticipate cheer in the grand *cena* which was to succeed. I knew that, even if "La bella" came, she would not be of the supper party: an exclusive affair, confined to friends of the family—a social circle, tabooed to all of her class.

I was still continuing my lonely perambulations—doing the best I could to feel an interest in the games that were going on—when a sweet, musical voice sounded in my ear, saying:

"You seem strangely abstracted, Señor Capitán! I fear our rural pastimes are but little to your liking?"

At last some one appeared to have taken compassion upon me; and turning, I saw it was Doña Ignacia!

I started, as one caught in the commission of a crime. For there was something in her speech, and its tone, which led me to suspect that she knew why I was proving so uncompanionable. She was alone, having parted from him who had been monopolizing her company most part of the time since we left the luncheon-table. I noticed that she looked a little excited, with a flush upon her face, which rendered her beauty all the more piquant, and imposing. A beautiful woman she was—for she had passed the age of girlhood—a very type of the *gracia Andalusiana*—such as any painter would have been glad to get for a sitter. But for my heart being already captive to another, I would in all likelihood have hailed the encounter with delight; and perhaps have flattered myself with the thought, that it might not be altogether accidental. As it was, I only looked upon it as a little awkward, and wished she had stayed with the enamored dragoon, from whom she had, no doubt, dragged herself away for a moment, commiserating my loneliness.

Thought is quicker than speech, and all these reflections were instantaneous, as I stammered out a response.

"On the contrary, señorita, very much to my liking. They are indeed most interesting. But as I've seen something of the kind before, of course—"

"Of course, you'd prefer seeing something else," she said, catching up my words at the point where I had stuck. "Or rather somebody you have seen before, and, unlike the games, greatly desire to see again. Am I right in my conjecture?"

If confused already, I now felt doubly so—almost enough to deprive me of the power to use my tongue. This woman, almost a stranger to me, seemed to comprehend all, and why I was wandering about.

She did that surely, as her next speech convinced me.

"Never mind making answer," she went on, without waiting for it. "I know your secret, señor; and it may give you pleasure to be told there's no need for you to fear disappointment. She will be here sooner or later. That *lepera* never fails to show herself, where she thinks there's a chance of being admired—especially if there's to be dancing."

Listening to these words, my surprise became amazement. The tone, the toss of the head, the scornful twitching of her mustached lip—for Ignacia Covarubio had this virile sign of Southern Spain, by many deemed beautiful—all com-

bined to make up the measure of my astonishment.

I had no doubt as to whom she made allusion. That was clear by what had been already said. She, so contemptuously styled "*lepera*," could be no other than the Queen of the Lakes.

Coincidence somewhat strange, though ever so accidental. Before I could gather myself for replying to a speech, which, while giving surprise had also a little nettled me, there came a sudden hush, succeeded by ejaculations, a man who stood near crying out:

"Mira! La Reina de los Lagos!"

And she it was, her brother by her side, the two just entering the inclosed ground where the sports were progressing. She was in a gala dress, of the special kind worn by *poblanas*; the *enagua* of short skirt, lace-fringed around the bottom; below silk stockings and satin slippers; and above the snow-white *camisa* of finest linen, sleeveless, and epauletted with the same sort of fringing at the shoulders; over this a loose flowing robe, more characteristic of the costume of her race; the *huipile*, of light colored stuff, Indian or Chinese silk; such fabrics reaching Mexico across the Pacific, through the port of Acapulco. Some flowers, resembling orange blossoms—*blumerias*—were tastefully arranged in her raven-black hair, which was plaited and gathered over her crown. But above the flowers, which were set along the side of the massive coil, was a white crape scarf, folded and lying flat—its doubled edge just flush with her forehead—the two ends fringed with silver bullion, falling behind her back. This, with broad gold earrings, a string of coral around her neck, with charms attached, and hanging over her full round bosom, recalled the Italian *contadina*, while her dark complexion, and the damask red of her cheeks, added to the similitude.

As she came across the smooth meadow, making approach not timidly nor yet boldly, but with that free, fearless step peculiar to the American Indian, all eyes were turned upon her. No one there could have justly questioned her claim to at least one of the titles she bore—the "*beautiful chinampera*." For such a being, to be contemptuously styled *lepera* was the very perversity of speech.

While mentally making these reflections—which all did not occupy over ten seconds' time—I had almost, if not quite, forgotten the grand dame who had so spoken of her. Ill-manners it was; and, turning to make apology, I discovered that the lady was no longer by my side!

CHAPTER XXI.

PLAYING SPY.

DOÑA IGNACIA had walked off, leaving me to myself. Looking after, I saw she was on return to the party from which she had separated, and thought of following her, with the excuses that had been forming on my tongue. But before setting after, I observed something which admonished me that it would be only to make matters worse. Though her back was toward me, I could tell by her carriage she was offended. There was something in her gait, and the style of her step, which seemed to say, "The wretch! I could trample him under foot, and take delight in doing so."

I had "put my foot in it," that was clear. Equally so, that it would take something more than a common apology to get me back into the good graces of Ignacia Covarubio. I was likely to be out of them for the rest of that day, if not ever after.

Perhaps at any other time I might have more regretted the little *contretemps*, but just then it did not vastly vex me. To say truth, her fling at the Indian girl had vexed me much more; and now that she was gone I set me to thinking what could have been her motive. Among Mexicans, the term "*lepera*" is synonymous with *canaille*; and coming from the lips of a lady in such sneering tone, with the other speeches conjoined, it had all the more significance. If there had been jealousy in the case I could have understood it; but up to that moment, with this lady I had not exchanged a dozen words. Crittenden, behaving as I was, would have been more likely to give her ground for jealousy; since he had been with her most part of the afternoon, and, as I could see, assiduous in his attentions. Why then should I be under the ban of her rebuke? And why the Indian girl so opprobriously spoken of?

After all, it was not so incomprehensible. It could be explained by the pride of birth and blood—the *sangre azul* rebelling at being put in the scales, even by implication, with that of the despised race. For it now occurred to me that Moreno, who had got behind my secret somehow, must have imparted it to his cousins. Hence Doña Ignacia's displeasure with me—from no jealous feeling, since such could not exist, but simply that I had offended, or was offending against *caste*.

Had I not committed an offense against good manners—for, to speak truth, I had stood too long with my back turned upon her—little should I have recked of what she or "society" might think of my admiration for the Indian girl. It was too sincere and strong, my heart too far gone, for me to care for consequences—least of all the world's criticisms and caprices.

Indeed, just then, I did not desire the grand lady's presence, and would have been only too pleased at being disembarassed of it, had the relief been brought about in a different way. As it was, I regretted it; and likely enough would have reason to regret it still further.

No use standing there to reflect on the *fiasco* I had made; nor had I the inclination. There was that near by would soon bring oblivion of it; ay, had brought it, ere Ignacia Covarubio was quite out of my sight.

I had conceived a purpose, which I now set about carrying out—one by no means novel, however questionable its character. For I intended to *play spy* on the chinampera! If such action were ever excusable, it should be in my case. On her I had lavished all my heart's love—I knew that now—embarked its whole treasures; and were she not worthy to bear them it would for me be shipwreck indeed. I must know something of the craft thus freighted—more than I knew already.

A knowledge I could not otherwise gain; for of whom was I to inquire? I dare not address myself to Captain Moreno. Nor was it likely that he could tell me all that was wanted, even if I had. His acquaintance with the girl, as I had come to understand, was limited to what had been told him by his cousins. And here was one of these same cousins casting insinuations at her—even open reproaches!

"That *lepera* never fails to show herself where she thinks there's a chance of being admired—especially where there's dancing."

Bitter words they had been to me, conveying the impression of vanity and frivolity, with the suspicion of something worse. They had, in fact, brought back into my mind the torturing thoughts I experienced listening to the wicked suggestions of the pelado, and the slanderous hints of Colonel Espinosa. As yet but slight opportunity had been afforded me of testing the truth of one, or the other. In a way, it was offered now, and I resolved to avail myself of it.

I had no preconceived plan—not thinking of the thing till that moment. And, indeed, all I intended doing, was to watch the girl's behavior during what was left of the day, and the hours of night that were to succeed.

I began by placing myself in a sort of ambush, where she was not likely to see me. She might not know that I was there; though the presence of my men, who were mingling with the crowd, would warn her of soldiers at the fiesta, different from those she was accustomed to see on such occasions. She would recognize their uniform, I knew; still she might not think of inquiring who was the officer with them. The tall, fiery-faced dragoon—for Crittenden stood six feet in his stockings—was more conspicuous than I; and she would take it to be he. Still, she had seen us together on the chinampa, and might think we were both there now.

Notwithstanding all this, I had got under cover, behind one of the flower-bedecked stands, where *pulqué*, *chia* water, and other light drinkables were retailed, and commanded a view of the entire arena of the sports, with the spectators around. But from my point of observation I saw naught to sadden; instead, much to make me glad. It gratified me to observe, that wherever the chinampera went—and she walked about everywhere, all the while accompanied by her brother—she was treated with courtesy, which had all the air of respect. This, too, by people of every class and calling. The rancheros, and arrieros—even the ragged pelados—took off their hats to her; while the *ricos*, no less polite, though not any more, respectfully saluted her as she passed them—some of the young "swells," showing themselves desirous to hold further speech with her, which was gracefully, not coquettishly, declined.

But it was the people of her own race who paid her most attention; these, as she walked past them, uncovering, and saluting with a deference, humble even to subservience. They appeared to be proud of her as a representative of their nation—subdued and long subjected—of their kings dethroned, but still revered. Not one there but knew that in her veins ran the royal blood of Tenochtitlan; knew her to be a princess; and that it was but slight misnomer to call her the "Queen of the Lakes."

Need I say that I was satisfied, gratified at observing all this?

Something besides saw I, to make me still more glad. As she was promenading around, she came opposite a group of men who stood by one of the stalls, drinking aniseed, or it might be Catalan brandy. More likely the latter, since they wore the uniform of the U. S. Mounted Rifles. She gave a start on seeing them; but, instead of keeping her eyes fixed upon the soldiers, she looked round and round, as though searching for some one else; gazed, and gazed again in every direction!

How my heart pulsed within me, keeping time to pleasure's sweetest tune, as I fancied that inquiring look was for me!

CHAPTER XXII.

TAKEN TO TASK.

IMPRINTING his last kiss on the snowy brow of the "White Woman," rose-tinting it as though it blushed, the sun went down over the western

Cordillera; the shadow of whose higher summits thrown afar across the valley, soon became blended into the purple of twilight.

Short is the interval between day and night on this elevated table-land, allowing just time to trim lamps, and get them ready for lighting. For outdoor pastimes neither lamps nor torches need be lit there, if it be that part of the month when the moon should show herself. Rarely is this luminary obscured by clouds, and when not, almost turns night into day.

On this night, however, as there was to be dancing under a canopy, the darkness there called for illumination, and rows of lamps, with wax candles, had been already ranged around it, to be lit as soon as required.

During the short twilight there was an interregnum in the sports—the invited guests—the *bon ton*—being taken inside the house for champagne, and other light refreshments, while the *oi polloi* became distributed among the various booths and stands to drink aniseed, Catalan, or *aguardiente*.

For my part I would have preferred remaining outside, but Moreno had got hold of me, and I could not refuse following him. I was afraid he would bring me face to face with her, whose late interview with me had been so unsatisfactory to both of us. As it was, however, on entering the *sala de comer*, where the wines were set out, I saw only gentlemen—the ladies having retired to their dressing-rooms to do a little toilet business for the *baile*.

"By the way, caballero," said he, as we stood together, hock glasses in hand, "you and cousin Ignacia don't seem to do much in the conversation line; you leave all that to your friend, the lieutenant. Well, you must admit she's a very beautiful creature."

"No one can help admitting that."

"The very woman, I should have thought, to captivate you. Don't you think she has caught the dragoon?" he added, with a laugh.

"Caught and secured him, I should say; for life, if she wish it so."

"Ah! I don't think she would quite wish that. Perhaps," he went on, regarding me with a peculiar look, "if it were some one else she had secured, she might more readily consent to a life's partnership with him."

"He will be a fortunate man who gets that consent from her."

"You are right there, *hombre*. Though she is my cousin, I can truly say I don't know a finer woman in all Mexico—except one."

I did; although she I had in my mind was not the same he was thinking of.

"Who that one is," he continued, "I needn't make any secret, after what you must have seen to-day. I may as well make a clean breast of it, and tell you that my other cousin and I are engaged. So, hands off there, caballero!" he concluded, laughingly.

"You need have no fear. After what I did see to-day, as you've rightly conjectured, there's no man in Mexico—for that matter, in all the world—who would have the slightest chance with Doña Marianita Covarubio, save Don Rafael Moreno."

"Bravo! Cleverly put, and thank you. But though of my two cousins I think her the handsomer, you don't, and I know it."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; spite of what you said this day. For it don't correspond with an opinion that I've heard you express before."

This was true enough, though how he had heard it I could not imagine. I remembered having said to some of my brother officers—when speaking of the affair in the theater—that of the two ladies in the box the taller one was by far the best-looking. I thought the same still. But it would not do to tell him so; hence my having said the opposite when questioned at an earlier hour. Under the circumstances the fib was excusable.

"Possibly I might," was my answer; "but, as you're aware, I had not then a fair opportunity of judging between them."

"And now that you have, your opinion remains unchanged. Come, *amigo mio*; confess it!"

This was all very embarrassing, and I would gladly have brought our dialogue to an end; but, for some reason I could not divine, he seemed desirous of continuing it.

"I cannot confess anything of the kind," I said, evasively; "it mightn't be true if I did."

"But it might, and I trust is. My cousin Ignacia is very fond of being admired—her only fault; and as she's the elder, and deems herself mistress of the mansion—by the way, 'twas she who authorized me to invite you—I'd like to flatter her vanity a little, by telling her she's your preference. It's always fun for me."

"But I thought you said the other was the coquette?"

"Ah! that was jest. If she were—well, I needn't say. But I see you don't care to speak your opinion of Ignacia one way or the other; and I think I know the reason. I've seen some one, a very beautiful creature, moving about among the people, and some one else following her with his eyes all the afternoon, with eyes for nobody else. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Come, Captain Moreno! I beg you'll not

jest any more about that. It's all a fancy of yours."

"A fancy of yours, rather. Be it so, *amigo*, and have your own way. I wanted it otherwise. But I see the old proverb is against me—'One man may take a horse to the water, but twenty can't make him drink.'"

At that moment, to my great relief, young Covarubio, the male cousin, came hastily up to say that the dancing was soon to begin, and Don Rafael, who was one of the ball stewards, was wanted in the canopy outside to direct certain preliminaries.

"You'll find me on the floor," he said, hurrying away, "where I shall be happy to introduce you to as many partners as you please. Though, if I mistake not," he added, again smiling significantly, "you won't care for more than one throughout all the dance. *Hasta luego!*"

At which he rushed off, leaving me much food for reflection.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WALTZING WITH A SYLPH.

I REMAINED but a few minutes longer in the *sala de comer*, only while drinking a glass of wine one of the *mozas* had poured out for me. During the time, however, my thoughts were busy, dwelling on the dialogue just closed. Strange it was, and I scarce knew what to think of it. It seemed clear enough that Captain Moreno wished me to become one of the family; he had almost said as much. But why? That was the unintelligible. For, while feeling flattered by his wish, I failed to understand his motive.

After all, it possibly meant nothing further than simply friendship for me; this between us, as I have already said, having grown to a warmth beyond common; partly from a congeniality in our tastes and dispositions, partly mutual esteem, and it might be something from the odd incident on which it was first founded. Or, his whole discourse may have been meant only as a bit of banter—a sort of thing in which he frequently indulged.

Whatever the object, I could not comprehend, nor did I reflect further on it then. There was something else to occupy me; and emptying my glass I hastened outside.

There everything seemed different, as by the change of scene in a theater. The lamps had been lit, and the great canopy was ablaze; the space underneath it covered with groups of figures, moving to and fro. The dancing had not yet begun; but the twanging of the harp and guitar, with the tuning of fiddles, told it soon would. In fact, the floor only waited for the ladies of the *élite*.

Presently these came, streaming out of the house in grand toilette; partners got paired; figures were formed; the music struck up; and away went every one in surrender to the delights of Terpsichore.

There is perhaps no country on earth, where class is separated from class by a slighter and less offensive barrier, than in this same Mexico. Even in the sister Republic of the United States there still lingers a certain *exclusivism*, marking many degrees in the social scale—a heritage left them by that grand dame, Mother England—which they have not got rid of after a century of democratic training! All that has been long since shaken off by the more volatile Mexicans—as by people in other Spanish-American States—where you may see the cattle-herd, or muleteer, dancing with the daughter of the hacienda; the proletarian of lowest grade side by side with his employer, smoking, drinking, and if not seated at the same dinner-table, certainly either seated or leaning over the same baize-covered board, where dice are being rattled, or cards dealt. In the cockpit, and at the *monté* table, all Mexicans are on an equality, as likewise in their public balls, known as *fandangos*.

Forewarned of this by repeated experiences, I was not surprised to find that the crowd under the canopy was composed of people belonging to all classes, and both sexes of course. No more, when several rancheros—the grandest gentlemen there if only dress were considered—approached the satin-clad and bejeweled ladies, with an air of the most perfect easiness, and begged the pleasure of having them for partners. More awkward I, when after searching around for the Indian girl—beauty like hers was not difficult to find—I bowed to her, and said:

"Señorita, do you remember me?"

Her glance gratified me, still more her speech in rejoinder.

"Remember you, caballero? What a question! *Ay Dios!* I do, and ever will."

"'Tis kind of you to say so. I feel flattered that you have not forgotten me."

"How could I, señor? You who saved me from insult. But for you—"

"Pray don't again speak of such a trifle. I'm only sorry it has hindered you from coming, as you used, to the city. But perhaps you don't care?"

I put the question inquisitorially, scanning her face for the answer.

"Indeed I do—care very much. It's so dull and lonely at home, sometimes."

"What! With that pretty parrot to talk to you—your namesake!"

She laughed, answering:

"Lorita is but poor company."

"In that we differ. I only wish I had such company; and could keep it all my life."

She looked in my face, half inquiringly, half in wonder.

"If you care so much for it, señor, you may have it. Brother will take it you, the next time he goes to market."

"Ah! señorita; it isn't the parrot I was speaking of."

The look of wonder still lingered in her eyes, but now more interrogation.

"Not the parrot! What then?"

I had it on my tongue to say "Its mistress" or "Its namesake," but forbore. Our friendship was not old enough for such familiarity as that, and it might be mistaken for rudeness. Pleased was I to think it might; but I had committed myself, and must make answer of some kind. So I stammered out:

"Never mind, I won't tell you now. When we meet again—but—" I paused at thought of the unlikelihood of our ever meeting again, which came like a black curtain between us. "Surely you will not always stay away from the city?"

"I hope not always. I so much wish to go again, and see what I saw last time—those brave soldiers of yours, on their great big horses, wheeling and turning all together. Oh! 'twas a grand, beautiful sight!"

"I'm glad it gratified you. I hope you'll come to witness it again—many a time."

"I should so like, if father would allow. But then, those Red Hats—"

She stopped abruptly, looking out into the darkness, and I could see something like fear upon her face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A man, who looked so like him."

"Like whom?"

"The Red Hat; the same who chased us on the canal."

"Where did you see him?"

"He was standing just there," she pointed to one of the supporting posts of the canopy, draped with evergreens. "But he's gone away now."

"Had he the red band upon his hat?"

"No, señor. It was his face, I thought, I knew. As my brother told you, we've seen him several times, but not always dressed the same way. And now he's in a different dress, if it be that man. But I hope it isn't."

"And I hope it is. Will you pardon me for leaving you, a little unceremoniously?"

She looked surprised at my wishing to withdraw, but answered:

"Si, señor!"

"With your permission I will seek you again, and ask you to be my partner for a dance."

Granted; and, turning my back upon her, I walked off.

It was a good half-hour before I rejoined her, all the interval occupied in threading my way through the crowd, under the canopy and outside it, looking on every side, gazing in the face of every man I met—all to no purpose. Among them I could see none resembling that of the Señor Don Hilario. Need I say I was searching for him?

She must have been mistaken. After what had happened her, it was natural she should have fears and fancies about the man. This was one of the last. So concluding, I gave up the search, and hastened to return to her.

I had meanwhile observed that she was dancing, and with more than one partner. Having El Guapo in my thoughts, I did not stop to note who they were. Only once for a moment, to watch her movements, and watching to admire them; for it meant the same. There was no dancer there who in grace could compare with her. A very Bayadere seemed *La bella!*

When I at length secured her for a waltz, I had no fear of my partner dragging me down upon the floor. It was not the *deux temps* of the present day, with its ludicrous jumping and jiggling, but the circular of years ago, that pronounced by Byron as the "poetry of motion"—at the time in vogue in Mexico, as most other parts of the Western world. I had not gone half round the ring with her, before discovering that I held in my arms a very sylph; so light and agile her movements, so smooth and serpentine her undulations, 'twas like spinning about with Cerito or Taglioni!

When the music dropped, and the waltz came to an end, she took my offered arm, and we wandered forth into the night. I cared not for what "society," with its tongue of slander, might say then. It was too late now for me to think of that; and I would have walked with her up and down under the glaring lights, not defiantly, but with perfect indifference as to what those looking on might think of it—even though they believed us to be betrothed.

And soon after we were so. It was for this purpose we had separated from the crowd; the one telling the other, not in words, but by some mute impulse, stirring both at the same time, that we wanted to be alone.

Alone stood we in the moonlight—away from

the noisy throng—beyond reach of listening ears or spying eyes—with the chaste moon and the pure snows of Popocatepec and the White Woman as our witnesses; and there, on that Christmas Eve, exchanged sweet words, with a promise never to be broken.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CENA.

It was yet but an early hour when the *baile* was brought to a close. As a rule the Mexicans are not given to night carousing. From the mild nature of their climate, *siempre-verano*, most of their merry-making is done out of doors and by daylight, of which they have enough. This night, however, being "Noche Buena," the dancing ended earlier, for there was the grand supper to come, and then, at midnight, the *misa del gallo*, or "cock's mass," so called from the days when clocks were unknown, and the crowing of Chanticleer was relied on for the hour of commencing the ceremony.

Most of the outside people went home to eat the *cena* in their own houses, such as were of the immediate neighborhood intending to return to the midnight mass in the chapel of the hacienda. In Mexico, where every one, women as well as men, goes on horseback, and usually at a gallop, a few miles or leagues are not considered distance.

Only the invited guests of the house reëntered it for the supper—enough, however, to fill the great dining-room, where tables were set in every available space.

I did not enter with the first crush, but a few minutes after; delayed outside by a scene of tender parting. For Lorita and her brother were going home to their water dwelling, to return no more that night. Their way was through San Isidro, distant about half a league; thence along the *acaloté*, which Crittenden and I had traversed going back to the city.

It was only to come to an understanding, when and where we should again meet. Then hands clasped, lips in contact, reluctant to speak *Adios*—which, however, had to be spoken—and we parted; she gliding on after the brother who had gone ahead, I turning back to join the gay throng around the supper tables.

A splendid "cena" it was, with every luxury obtainable in the Valley of Mexico, where most of the delectable dishes can be had; game in rare variety, fruits alike of the tropic and temperate zones—fresh plucked at that—with the wines of both worlds, and crystallized snow from the near *sierras nevadas* to cool them. A merry party as well; they who composed it very unlike people, who in another hour would be kneeling on the hard flags of a church floor, devoutly repeating paternosters! For now they had reached the climax of the day's enjoyment, and the spirit of misrule reigned, Christmas crackers going off like pistol-shots, amid sallies of wit and peals of laughter.

And yet I, who should have been gayest of the gay; I who had just received a confession—the surrender of a woman's heart, that one I most wished to have and hold—I was not happy! There was a weight upon my spirits, which neither the hilarity around, nor all the wine I was drinking, could remove.

Communing with myself, I tried to discover what was causing it, but failed. It had naught to do with the little unpleasantness between myself and the Doña Ignacia; though on her side that still remained, as I could tell by her almost studied avoidance of me, ever since our encounter in the afternoon. On mine, it was no more thought of; or, at all events, not with sufficient seriousness to account for the gloom which was now holding me in its grasp, with the tenacity of a nightmare.

And what would account for it? For a long time I could not think, nor even form a conjecture; only that it seemed, in some way or other, a foreboding of evil. At length, however, it began to take shape, and ugly that shape was. During the hour of bliss, after that sweet waltz, I thought not of the circumstances preceding it, and what my partner had been saying, in the belief she saw the ruffian who insulted her. The whole incident was for the time quite out of my mind. But it came back into it now, with a vividness painfully clear, almost causing me to cry out. This was the dark cloud hitherto below the horizon, now ominously overhead. She, my betrothed, was in danger! So believed I, too truly; for, as if to confirm me in the belief, at that very instant came a singular coincidence. As the ladies had retired to array themselves in costumes more becoming the religious ceremony about to take place, Crittenden, hitherto engaged elsewhere, made his way to where I sat, and took seat beside me, soon as on his chair saying:

"By the way, old fellow, did you see any one to-day that you recognized as an old acquaintance?"

I was rather annoyed by the interrogatory, thinking it referred to the chinampera, and that he meant chaffing me—for which I was in no humor just then. But, as the best way would be to meet him in his own vein, I rejoined, without showing rancor:

"Of course I did. And if your eyes hadn't been blinded by a blaze of beauty elsewhere,

you'd have seen that I not only met an old acquaintance, but danced with her."

"Oh! you're speaking of the Indian girl." "And who are you speaking of?" I asked, the frown which his first question had brought over my face, quick passing away from it.

"That scoundrelly greaser who gave us the slip—the boatman who left us boatless on the chinampa."

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed, with a start. "Have you seen him, Crittenden? I mean here to-day?"

"Him, or his ghost. Though if it were the ghost, it displays a better taste in dress than the embodied individual itself. The man I saw was no longer in rags, but got up regardless of expense, in a suit of blue velveteen, buttoned all over, and swinging the best sort of serapé over his shoulder. For all I'm quite certain 'twas our quondam boatman."

"But why didn't you lay hands on him? Or come and tell me? We have good reasons for arresting the rascal. For that matter, hanging or shooting him on the spot. What hindered you?"

"Not the want of will, I can assure you; but the lack of opportunity. At first I couldn't realize the fact of its being he; and when, after a little reflection, I felt sure of it, 'twas too late. I looked all over the ground, taking your sergeant and the bugler with me, but could see nothing more of the blue velveteens. So I suppose he must have seen that I had recognized him, and given La Soledad leg-bail."

The presentiment hitherto oppressing me was a presentiment no more. It had changed to keen, active apprehension. If it was the *pelado* Crittenden saw, and he seemed quite sure of it, then El Guapo must have been there also, for I had long since come to the conclusion that the two scoundrels were coadjutors—both *salteadores* belonging to the same band.

And where were both now? Where La Bella? Had she got safe home?

A cold shiver ran through me, as in quick succession I asked these questions of myself. But a second, and yet stranger, coincidence was coming, and near at hand. As I was telling Crittenden what had occurred about the other suspicious character—whom he but knew by repute—a noise in the court-yard outside interrupted our dialogue. There were several voices speaking excitedly; then the dining-room door was pushed open, and an Indian youth rushed into the room, panting as if pursued!

"The brother of La Chinampera Bella!" I heard several exclaim, as I sprung to my feet, and advanced to meet him.

"What is it?" I asked.

A question almost superfluous, for I anticipated the answer. He gave it gaspingly:

"My sister! She's carried off! *Dios de mi alma!*"

CHAPTER XXV.

WHICH WAY?

"YOUR sister carried off! By whom?"

Another question equally superfluous. I could have named the men, or if not could have described them.

"Robbers," returned the youth; "salteadores, I know, for they had horses and arms. Several there were, and, Señor Capitan," he continued, recognizing me, "one you know yourself—the Red Hat; he that came after us on the canal!"

I stayed to hear no more, but rushing out of the room, Crittenden with me, called out for the bugler, shouting at the highest pitch of my voice. Luckily he had not gone to bed, but with two or three of his comrades was hanging around the *cocina*, doing a little flirtation with the damsels of that quarter on their own account.

"Boots and saddles, bugler! Be quick!"

The men looked amazed, less from the unexpected order than seeing me so excited. But all rushed for the stables, he of the trumpet soon letting us hear its tone, the "Boots and saddles" ringing clear around the walls of the hacienda.

While the horses were being caparisoned, I further questioned the young Indian, drawing from him all the information he was able to give. He and his sister had passed San Isidro, and were getting into their skiff—which they had left at a landing in the *acaloté* beyond; he was already in, the girl just stepping over the gunwale, when two men, gliding out from among the bushes, laid hold of and dragged her back. Then, raising her in their arms, they bore her off between them.

"She struggled and cried out?"

"She struggled, señor; but only one cry. She could not say more; the ladrones threw a serapé over her head—that hindered her voice."

"And what did you do?"

"I shouted loud as I could, señor. Then I jumped out of the boat and ran after them. But before I could get up they were joined by a great many others, all on horseback, and they had two horses with only the saddles upon them. On one of them they set my sister—*pobrecita!* Then he who had her in his arms mounted behind, and they all galloped off."

"But how did you know one of them was the Red Hat?"

"Because I saw his face, señor. I was close up before they got quite away, and the moon was on it. He wasn't either of the two that first took her off, but one of the others who met them. He was leading all, and giving directions. Oh, yes! I'm sure it was he, señor; I've seen him so often, and so had sister. She thought he was near her this night when they were dancing. She was just telling me about it as we were going back to our boat, and it made us afraid. Gone away with that man! *Av demí!* What will he do to her?"

His distress seemed great, but it was nothing to mine. His speech was driving me mad, and it relieved me to hear the tramping of hoofs on the pavement outside, with the clink of steel scabbards. The men of my escort were ready for the road.

In a trice we were in our saddles, Crittenden of course along, and also Moreno. The Mexican officer would not stay behind; instead, seemed rather pleased at being called upon once more to do duty. An ardent soldier, he had felt it irksome to have his sword so long rusting in the sheath. Something more than his sword I wanted now—his guidance; for without that our pursuit would have been but a game of blind man's buff.

And he was just the right man in the right place. He had acquaintance with every route and road in the valley of Mexico, and the mountains surrounding it. But, what was more to our purpose, he knew all about El Guapo, and where that gay Lothario made his home when playing the rôle of robber—a knowledge he had late gained from Colonel Espinosa. And just that I now wanted to possess, for I had determined on tracking the abductor to his den, if I should there have to lay down my life.

In our saddles the question came up, "Which way?" of course asked of Moreno. It required him to reflect before answering it. San Isidro was near the lake's edge; La Soledad being between this and the Great National Road, by which we had traveled part way, coming to the hacienda. Espinosa said that the robber had his head-quarters somewhere near the Pyramids of San Juan de Teotihuacan. The direct route to this last place from San Isidro was by La Soledad. But there was another road which could be taken; roundabout, by reason of an isolated *cerro*—one of the little volcanoesspoken of—which diverted it, so increasing the distance by miles.

With such spoil as he had just captured, the bandit would make back for his lair—we felt sure of that. Our uncertainty was as to which of the two roads he had taken. But we were not long in doubt. As it chanced one of my escort was an old plainsman, of course a skilled tracker; and, soon as we had ridden out to the road leading past the hacienda, at some three or four hundred yards' distance from it, I directed him to dismount, and examine the tracks.

Flinging himself out of his saddle, he stooped down and commenced scrutinizing the ground. Luckily there was moonlight in his favor, which made it easier.

"Plenty o' hoss-tracks hyar, capt'n; but all goin' torst the Vera Cruz road. It's the people as hev been to the gatherin'."

"Go back a little the other way, toward the lake. See what's there."

He did as directed, walking off a score of yards or so beyond the gate of the hacienda avenue; then bent his body, with eyes to the ground as before.

"Well; any gone that way?"

"Yes, capt'n, a dozen or tharabout; but only two as seem at all fresh. The rest must 'a' passed along afore sun-up o' this mornin'."

"Do you see any from the lake—coming this way?"

"Neery one; all hev goed torst it."

"Back to your saddle!"

"That's to our advantage," observed the Mexican officer, as we turned our horses' heads toward the Vera Cruz road. "To make San Juan of the Pyramids, they must cross the *Camino Nacional*, at the village of Los Reyes. We strike it at Tlapisahua, and then on to Los Reyes. We've a good twenty minutes of time in our favor; and if we make good speed we may yet overtake and perhaps intercept them, before—"

"Forward! Full gallop!" I shouted out, without waiting for him to finish; and forward went we, fast as spurs could make our horses go. The moonlight gave us every opportunity, making the white, dusty track conspicuous, so that there was no need to draw bridle for an instant. And we drew it not, till we had reached the main road for Mexico. Nor even then; for turning toward the city, we dashed through Tlapisahua at charging speed, the clatter of our horse's hoofs waking up the people of the place, who had long before gone to bed.

In the same way we rode through Los Reyes, but not to arouse the sleepers there. Their slumbers had been already disturbed by the trampling of a troop which had preceded us; and as we galloped between the two rows of *adobe* dwellings, we could here and there see faces in the windows, with eyes looking out, half-curious, half-frightened.

About a mile beyond Los Reyes—going city-

ward, as we were—the road for the town of Tezcoco, which is the same for San Juan de Teotihuacan, turns abruptly to the right, thence tending northward along the edge of the great salt lake—Tezcoco itself. We did not yet know whether the party we were in pursuit of was ahead of us or not, and were making for the junction of the two roads to get this assurance.

But we got it before reaching that point. As we passed out of the little *pueblita*, the old plainsman, who was riding by my side, a length or two ahead of the others, looking down upon the dusty road, said quietly:

"Fresh tracks hyar, capt'n. Ten or a dozen hosses hev jest been rid 'long this road; goin' at a consid'able smart pace, too."

Scarce had he finished speaking, when the truth of his words was confirmed, and by ocular evidence. As we were about rounding an angle of the road—which would bring us clear of some bushes, hitherto hindering our view—we saw a dark clump in the middle of the causeway, less than a half-mile ahead, and moving, as could be told by some metallic points that sparkled in the moonlight.

"The salteadores, *por cierto!*" muttered Moreno, as he spurred up by my side. "See! they're leaving the main road—turning off for Tezcoco."

This was true; the black mass hitherto of small dimensions, had commenced lengthening out, in *echelon* to the right, and kept on till we counted six complete files. For the robbers were marching in formation "by twos." Evidently they had not yet seen us; for they were going at a walk, as if they had no fear or thought of being pursued. They could not well have heard us; since for a mile or more back the causeway was thickly covered with dust, which had deadened the hoof-strokes of our horses.

Soon as sighting them, I had drawn up, giving back the command "Halt!" in a half-whisper. I only stopped to take their measure, and determine the best course of action. There they were now, full before our eyes, as they advanced along the right-hand road, lances at rest, the blades of which we could see gleaming and glistening. In all about a dozen of them, not so many as of ourselves. But had there been ten times the number I should have continued the pursuit, and I knew there was not a man at my back who would have failed to follow me.

Our halt was but for a few seconds, the Mexican officer saying:

"Now's our time to get up with them. They're on a road where, for the next three leagues, there isn't break or bush a rat could hide itself in."

"Full gallop again!" I called back to the escort; and at that gait we again went on.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUDES WITH A CHRISTMAS SUPPER.

WE made no attempt further to conceal ourselves from the party pursued. In the bright moonlight that was plainly impossible; and soon as we had cleared the scrub, they saw us. We could tell it by their suddenly breaking into a gallop, in a bad scare, as was evident by the tone of their ejaculations, which we could distinctly hear.

We stayed not to look or listen, but rode earnestly on; soon ourselves turning into the Tezcoco road, where we had them right in front of us.

Henceforth it would be a simple question of speed between horses and horses; but I had no doubt about the result. The men of our escort were the pick of my troop, all splendidly mounted; and it was not the first opportunity that had fallen to us to make trial of the American horse against the Mexican mustang. We had chased both salteadores and guerrilleros before, and knew that the little native steed, although game, and bottom to the backbone, is no match in heels for his larger and longer-striding congener. But if not doubting our ability to overtake the horsemen pursued, I had fears of something that might occur when they were overtaken. I had heard of these Mexican highwaymen, when brought to bay, and under the belief death was to be dealt out to them, refusing to surrender, dying desperately, but first killing their captives! More than once had I seen recorded, the case of a beautiful girl having a *machete* thrust through her, just as father, brother, or lover had reached the spot, and been upon the point of effecting her rescue! What if such should be the fate of her—my betrothed?

I was in a very agony of suspense—of keen apprehension. But, perhaps fortunately, I had no time to dwell upon it. In ten minutes more it would all be decided, for life or for death.

We could see the pursued making every effort to escape us, the pennons of their lances waving about as they struck the shafts against the sides of their horses, urging the animals on. Ours were at their best speed, breathing hard, as they pressed forward, tossing the foam from their lips in flakes that came clouting back in our faces. We in the saddles silent all—not a word now passing among us—no sound save the clattering of hoofs—and the clinking of empty scabbards—our sabers now drawn.

Soon the half-mile of white track—that

stretched between us and them, was shortened to a quarter, and rapidly getting less. Another dash would do it.

"Cut every one down who resists!" I shouted back to my men. "But be careful you don't harm the girl; for heaven's sake—for *mine!*"

I think most of them understood the nature of the appeal, which, far as they could, I knew would insure her safety. Whether or not, they were the last words spoken till the muzzles of our horses were almost touching the tails of the rearmost mustangs. Then other words were uttered, but not on our side. They came from the bandits. No warlike shout, nor battle-cry to begin the conflict. Instead, the cowardly exclaim:

"*Nos rendamos!*" (We surrender!)

Never were men more astonished than we at hearing it, at the same time seeing the robbers, who had reined up, fling their lances down upon the road, piteously appealing to us to spare their lives!

Only two offered resistance, as we first dashed in among them; these in obedience to the order I had given—too late to be recalled—being instantly sabered in their saddles, out of which they dropped dead.

Fortunately, the man who carried the captive was not one of them. Seeing that I commanded, he came riding up to me—the girl on the saddle before him, with the serapé still over her head, and corded around her arms.

"Señor General!" he said, "I deliver up my charge to you, and glad I am to get rid of it. Caramba! I should never have undertaken such an uncongenial duty but for our chief, who would have killed me had I disobeyed him. *Eh bien!*" he added, turning his eyes upon one of the two who had been sabered; "that's something to be thankful for. El Guapo will give me no more of his disagreeable orders."

I heard the words, but without heeding or thinking of them; my thoughts being occupied, as my arms, in releasing the captive from her uncomfortable situation. The bandit lent his aid with every demonstration of alacrity. When the muffling was at length removed from her head, and the moonbeams fell upon her face, I gazed at it, first anxiously, then with joy unspeakable. Her long black hair was down, and disheveled; the face it shadowed pale; but the eyes were bright and beautiful as ever—radiant of life as of light—giving me the assurance that no harm had happened her.

A wild glance, wondering and interrogative, quick followed by one of recognition, and she flung herself on my breast, crying out:

"Tis you, *amante mio!* Saved! I am saved!"

"Yes, *Lorita querida!* And you need never more fear the man who meant you harm. He is there."

I pointed to the dead body of the bandit, lying near with face upturned to the moon's light. A handsome face it was, even with the angry scowl, which must have been on it as he breathed his last.

She gave it but a glance, then shuddering and clinging closer to me, cried out:

"Take me away! Oh, take me away!"

I was leading her off the ground, when Crittenden and Captain Moreno came up—the latter with a peculiar expression on his face. After congratulating the chinampera on her escape, he turned to me with a laugh, saying:

"Caballero! I owe you a supper for six; which debt I shall be most happy to discharge on to-morrow, Christmas night, at the Fonda de Espiritu Santo—if that will suit your convenience."

I stared at the man in astonishment, wondering what in the world he could mean. Such a proposal at such time and place!

"I do not comprehend you, Captain Moreno."

"Possibly you will, after looking at this."

He stretched forth his hand, on the palm of which I saw something round, glittering in the moonlight. It was a gold watch.

"That's the *reloja*," he said, "of which by your untimely interference the pelado despoiled me. One of Losada's best, as you see; and, as I told you, cost me twenty doubloons. So you can't say I was exacting, when I put you to the expense of a supper for six."

"But how—where—when have you recovered it?"

"Ah! I'd almost forgotten that. Just now; and from the thief himself! There he lies, not likely to filch from any more fobs in this world—whatever he may do in the next. *Mira!*"

I looked at what he was pointing to. It was the dead body of the other robber who had fallen—he too lying on his back. Soon as seeing his face, I recognized it—as Crittenden had already done—the boatman who had betrayed us!

And now, recalling his speech, about a service I had rendered worth many hundreds of dollars, and comparing this with the price of Captain Moreno's watch, I at length understood what he meant by his mock gratitude. Footpad, boatman and bandit were all one and the same man!

So rapid had been our pursuit of the robbers, so abrupt its termination, we were back at La Soledad in time for the midnight mass. In

which I took no part; though the lieutenant of dragoons did. Of myself, I only halted at the hacienda to pick up the brother of my betrothed, who had remained there in the interim.

Having accompanied them to San Isidro, and seen both safe into their boat—safe enough now—I galloped back to La Soledad, arriving too late to bid "buenas noches" to the ladies of the house. They were both abed; Doña Ignacia, if asleep, possibly dreaming about a man in blue uniform frock, with yellow facings, whose low tastes and predilections—in the matter of womankind—made him in her eyes a very monster of iniquity.

Somewhat in fear of her frowns on the following morning, I took the precaution to avoid them by leaving La Soledad, soon as there was sunlight. Fortunately, I could plead plausible excuse for this early departure—duty. The salteadores we had captured, required taking on to the city, to be lodged in the Grand Jail of the *Acordada*. So, deputing Captain Moreno to speak my "Adios" to his cousins—the uncle saw me into the saddle—I was off long before the hour of *almuerzo*. Of course, Crittenden went with me, though not without some coaxing. He would have preferred staying to breakfast.

But if on that Christmas Day we did not eat our morning meal in the company of Captain Moreno, nor yet dinner, we supped with him—as he had proposed, at the Espiritu Santo. The same six as before, with a seventh, Crittenden himself, added to the party. All, it may be, even merrier than at our first meeting; I, myself, certainly so. For, on this night over the supper table, there was nothing said, nor insinuated, to vex or sadden me. Not even by Colonel Espinosa; who, possibly, had heard from his friend Moreno, that one day I might have, for wedded wife, her he had unwittingly aspersed:

THE QUEEN OF THE LAKES.

THE END.

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